







# THIRD LOOP:

## THE NAMELESS PRINCESS AND THE CRUEL EMPEROR

1

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Third Loop: The Nameless Princess and the Cruel Emperor Volume 1

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Third Loop: The Nameless Princess and the Cruel Emperor Volume 1

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"MY NAME'S RYUHO."

"HIS TONGUE'S  
SO ROUGH."

**RYUHO**

A Flame Tiger from

the nation of Nanran.

**THAT**

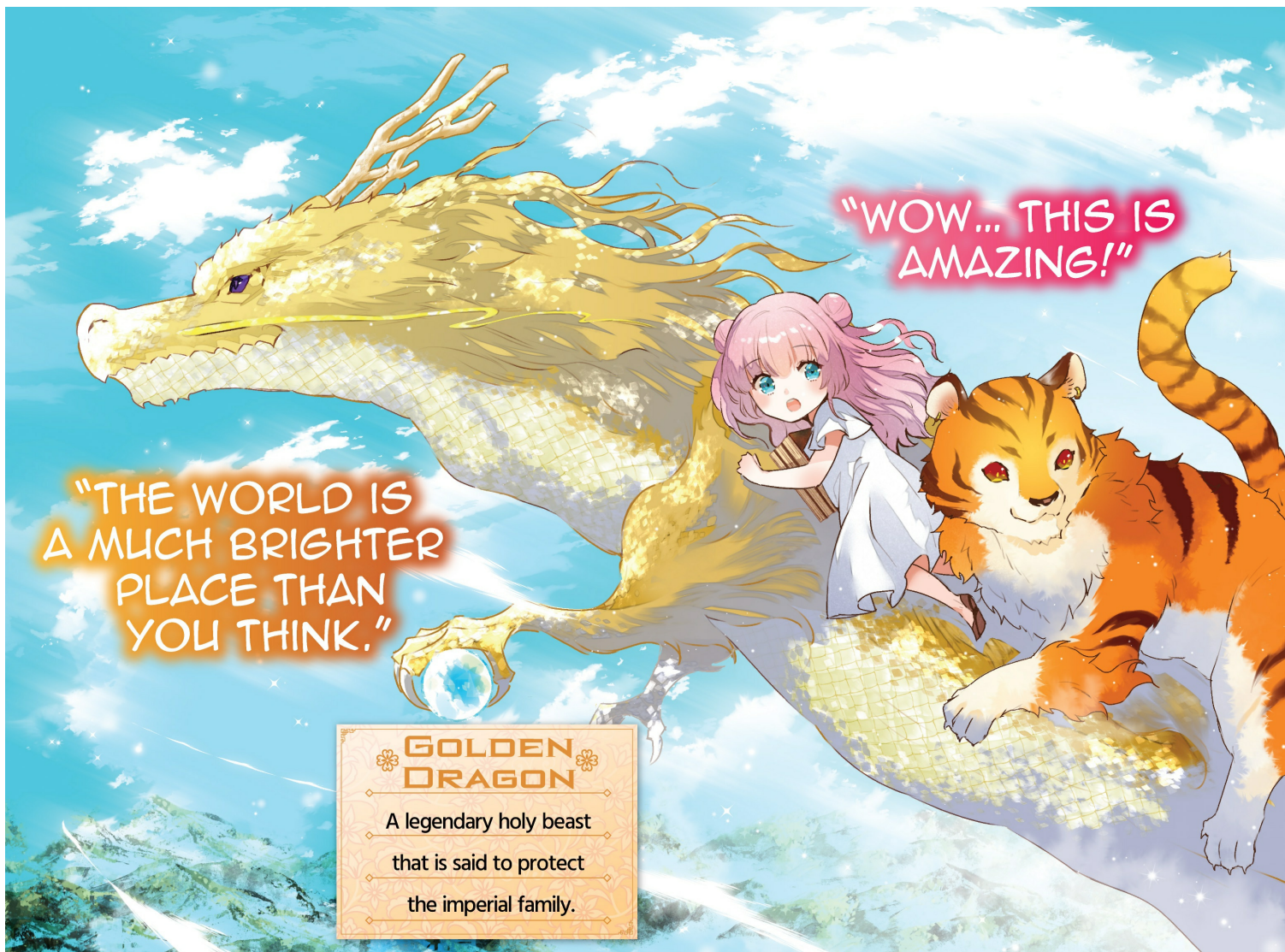
A young girl on her third  
time loop. Having not been

given a proper name,

she's simply called That.







"THE WORLD IS  
A MUCH BRIGHTER  
PLACE THAN  
YOU THINK."

"WOW... THIS IS  
AMAZING!"

### GOLDEN DRAGON

A legendary holy beast  
that is said to protect  
the imperial family.











"SOMEONE HELP LINA!  
ANYONE WILL DO!"



# Chapter 1: The Time Loop of the Nameless Princess

**CHIEF** Lady in Waiting Mion furrowed her brow while looking at the young girl before her. Based on the report, the girl should have been wearing a Yulan one-piece dress. However, she was wearing pajamas.

Deflated, Mion glared at a palace lady sitting at the table. This maid had passed the information along to her. She'd even asked to become Mion's personal handmaid in exchange for the report. Now, the maid's shoulders trembled beneath Mion's cold gaze.

*Well, what else did I expect?* Mion thought. *I'll have to change my line of attack. Still, it's impossible to find good help these days.*

Mion shifted her gaze from the palace lady to the homemade cakes in a row on the table. She sighed in exasperation. Cake was a rare delicacy in this country. The empress had died three years ago, but she'd brought this foreign dessert to Jinlong when she'd first married the emperor.

"After the empress's death, the emperor decreed three years of mourning," Mion said. "Yesterday marked the third anniversary of her death. Even so, when I heard the outrageous rumors of people celebrating, I came to check in disbelief. Is that cake you're eating? I'm disappointed in all of you..."

As a departure from usual, two knights were accompanying Mion. Both glanced at the cake on the table. Afterward, they observed the faces of the wet nurse and the palace ladies seated there.

Mion kept her tone gentle. She'd been a loyal servant of the emperor since before he'd usurped the throne. Since there was no empress, she was put in charge of the inner court. Everyone trusted Mion as the chief lady-in-waiting. Thus, no one would ever suspect her of abusing a young girl. While brushing aside her long, jet-black hair, she turned a look of disappointment on the girl in front of her.

That girl had light pink hair.



*Why do I have to see Mion at the beginning of a loop?! the girl wondered, anger seething in the pit of her stomach. I just died after being betrayed by someone I trusted! I didn't even have time to grieve! This is all Mion's fault! Usually, she only brings palace ladies, but today, of all days, she brought knights too. Is this woman seriously trying to accuse a three-year-old girl of a crime? She had it out for me even at this age, huh? Ugh, now I'm pissed! If I'm going to die no matter what I do, I'm done groveling to this woman!*

The young girl had made up her mind. This was her third time loop—in other words, her fourth life. When she timidly lifted her head, a rainbow-colored luster shone from her teary, azure eyes.

*Take this! Baby Ming Ming's signature move: "Adorable little girl on the verge of tears, BEAM!"*





During the young girl's first loop, a married couple who owned a bar took care of her. That couple had been parents to a three-year-old girl named Ming Ming. Even at that age, everyone in the bar already adored her. No ruffian stood a chance against her cuteness. Everyone had doted on Ming Ming, obliging her every request. Whether she'd wanted to be held, placed on someone's shoulders, or ride someone like a horse, no one had ever turned her down.

*On the other hand, I wasn't the least bit cute as a child, the young girl thought. I was so expressionless that no one ever doted on me. But this time, I'll take a leaf out of Ming Ming's book. Time to squeeze out some sympathy!*

Tears formed in the young girl's azure eyes, threatening to spill down her chubby, peach cheeks. Her buoyant, light pink hair was as airy as cotton candy. Shockingly thin limbs peeked out of her shabby white clothes. Cocking her head in a troubled manner, she turned her gaze on Mion and the two knights behind her. At that moment, she seemed ready to burst into tears.

Mion took a reflexive step backward. Had the young girl ever shown so much expression before? No matter what Mion said or how hard she pinched her, she'd always remained impassive, if somewhat displeased.

The young girl's tearful expression tugged on the knights' heartstrings. "Ngh," the brown-haired knight groaned, squeezing his chest. Though the gray-haired knight remained more composed, he still regarded her with pity. As for the young girl, she turned her gaze on Marfa—her wet nurse.

"Princess..." Upon seeing the young girl on the verge of tears, Marfa returned to her senses. "Lady Mion! Didn't the three-year mourning period come to an end yesterday? That's what I was told."

"In the imperial capital, we mourn until the day the funeral ends," Mion responded. "Thus, the three-year mourning period will end in one more week. That is common sense. Despite your claims of ignorance, I'm not sure how the emperor will respond. Though I must tell him of this, I'll do my best to avoid inviting his misunderstanding."

Mion let out a seemingly worried sigh. She was skilled at feigning kindness. Even now, she appeared concerned for people who'd disrespected the emperor.

“Even so, I’ll have to report on Princess *That* eating cake,” Mion added. Her eyes brimmed with regret and sympathy as she looked at the young girl.

The young girl didn’t have an actual name, as her father hadn’t given her one. She was called *That* for the sake of convenience. “Your father didn’t give you a real name because he sees you as a nuisance,” Mion explained once. “Per his orders, we must call you *That*.”

She’d then proceeded to abuse the young girl.

Consequently, the young girl also thought of herself as nameless. When asked for her name, she always responded, “*That*.” The dubious expressions this elicited always puzzled her. Furthermore, she was never called *This*. Only *That*—implying her vast distance from other people. Nevertheless, she never considered introducing herself by another name. The abuse she’d suffered as a child had drilled that type of thinking into her.

“I’m the one who made the cake,” Marfa said, attempting to defend the young girl. “The princess has nothing to do with this!”

Upon hearing these words, *That* realized something. Her servants in the storehouse had never referred to her as *That* in her first life. Or in her subsequent loops. Though she was poor at this time in her life, she was also loved.

*But at this rate, each and every one of these kind people will die tragically, That thought. If I don’t receive a name on my fifth birthday, Marfa will be executed, and nearly everyone else will be dismissed. I can’t let Mion start to distrust Marfa!*

Pretending to be shocked by Mion’s words, *That* dropped her cake. “O-Oopsie...” she mumbled, tears welling in her large, azure eyes again.

*Umm, what does a person usually call their parents?* *That* wondered. *As I recall, Ming Ming called them Mommy and Daddy.*

*That* momentarily struggled to come up with an answer. She’d never spoken to her parents before. Everyone else called them His Majesty and Her Majesty. Still, a child addressing their parents by such titles seemed strange.

*Welp, I’ll just copy Ming Ming since I have no other ideas!*



“I just wanted to eat something Mommy liked to understand her better...” That mumbled.

The two knights behind Mion regarded That with piteous expressions. Even Mion appeared momentarily shaken. However, she soon recovered.

“Do you miss your mother that much?” she asked kindly. “In that case, shall we *visit* Her Majesty?”

That’s head shot up. Had Mion just threatened to kill her in a roundabout manner?

*I’ll use this to my advantage!* That thought. *Take this! Ming Ming’s signature move: unbridled joy!*

“Yes!” That cried, nodding joyfully.

At that moment, the two knights positioned themselves between That and Mion. They’d understood the implication behind the chief lady in waiting’s words.

“That would be an abuse of your authority, Lady Mion,” the brown-haired knight redressed her with a resolute bearing.

“I’m only joking,” Mion replied with a small laugh, looking at That with ridicule in her eyes. “Besides, how could she have understood the double meaning?”

Until now, That had never talked back to Mion for fear of abuse. Regardless of how the woman had treated her, she’d always grinned and borne it. But no matter how much she bore, nothing changed. In the end, she’d wound up expressionless—devoid of emotion.

*I’m not putting up with her any longer!*

“Are you going to kill me?” That asked the knight, her clothes stained with cake.

Her question caused the knight to recoil. Those didn’t sound like the words of a three-year-old.

“Are you punishing me because I killed Mommy...?” That pressed. “Then let me go to Mommy and tell her sorry.”

Her tearful eyes moved the adults to tears as well.

*Am I being a bit too manipulative?* That wondered. *Still, Ming Ming wouldn't have held back!*

Marfa dashed to That's side and embraced her. "It's not your fault, Princess! Her Majesty gave her life to bring you into this world. You leaving to join Her Majesty would most certainly grieve her. Who's been feeding you such lies?!"

That looked at Mion, her eyes still watery. "No lie. Mish Mion said so. It's true. I'm bad girl."

In fact, Mion *had* said this, and That had believed herself evil for her entire first life. The people in the lower city bar had been the first to teach That how to love herself.

The knights and palace ladies regarded Mion suspiciously. At the same time, Mion found herself at a loss for words. That had never talked back to her up until now. No matter what Mion had said to her, she'd only smiled and tried to avoid further abuse.

*What's with her today?* Mion wondered.

"Please don't get the wrong idea, everyone," Mion said out loud. "Surely, this child misheard or misunderstood me. I was merely offering to take her to the empress's grave."

"Really?" That asked. "You'll take me?"

*Take this! Ming Ming's signature move: happiness special!*

That stared at Mion expectantly. She knew full well that Mion's hands were tied. The emperor had ostracized his daughter, for he believed her to be the cause of his wife's death. Thus, Mion flinched. She couldn't possibly ask for the emperor's permission to escort That to the empress's grave, after all.

"Yes, I'll, um... consult the emperor on this matter," Mion hedged, maintaining her facade of kindness.

"Shank you sho much," That replied. "P-Pleashe do thish for me, M-Mish Mion."

She untangled herself from Marfa's arms, got down on all fours, and pressed

her forehead to the ground. However, she hadn't slurred her words on purpose.

The knights who'd accompanied Mion looked at her, shocked. Was a three-year-old girl really prostrating herself?

Flustered, Mion scooped the girl up in her arms, prickling with irritation. "Such reverence is unnecessary, Princess That."

*Why is nothing going according to plan?* Mion wondered.

Originally, Mion had planned to let the knights see That celebrating her birthday. Afterward, she would have encouraged them to spread rumors about the girl disrespecting the empress. At this rate, Mion was putting her own position in jeopardy. To vent her irritation, she pinched That hard on the back.

"Ouch!" That squealed.

"Oh dear," Mion said with a smile, feigning composure. "I only meant to squash a bug, but it seems I used too much force."

As she glared at That, her eyes practically screamed, *"Keep your mouth shut, girl."*

According to Mion, she'd always pinched That to *"kill the bad bugs inside her"*. In her first life, That believed her. In fact, she'd always been forced to show gratitude.

With tears in her eyes, That smiled and responded with the same words as usual. "Shank you very much."

Mion smiled in satisfaction. Pain must have restored the girl's wits.

Yet, most unexpectedly, That rolled up her jacket and showed Marfa where she'd been pinched. "Mish Mion is always killing bugs for me because she's so nice," she announced.

A red welt stood out on the soft spot on the young girl's back. In response to witnessing such a painful sight, the knights looked at Mion with horror.

"Oh dear," Mion said. "Apparently, I was too late, and the bad bug stung you. I apologize for my ineptitude. I'll have medicine delivered here at once."

She then departed from the storehouse with a thin smile, seeming

unperturbed.

“Simply eating cake in remembrance of her mother is hardly disrespectful,” the gray-haired knight told Mion. “And it seems as though the wet nurse baked it herself.”

Mion smiled and nodded. “We should punish the palace lady who attempted to deceive us, no? Could you imagine if anything happened to poor That?”

She didn’t allow the frustration of a failed plan to show on her face. Instead, she responded as if concerned for the girl. The two knights nodded, seeming relieved.

“Lady Mion,” the brown-haired knight said. “Are you really going to ask His Majesty about the princess visiting her mother’s grave?”

Mion regarded the man with the most tender smile she could muster. “Hmm... Why don’t you ask him for me?”

The contrast between her smile and icy tone couldn’t have been starker. Immediately, the knight’s back broke out into a cold sweat.



**THAT’S** third loop started shortly before facing off with Mion.

*I’m back here again...*

The young girl woke up in a less-than-lavish bed. As a bush warbler sang outside her small window, the scent and feel of her bed brought back a multitude of memories. The royal family of the Jinlong Empire resided within the Purple Forbidden Palace. In the northernmost section of the palace, a storehouse stood on the edge of the abandoned Big Dipper Garden. According to legend, a mad princess was once imprisoned in this storehouse.

The young girl’s buoyant, light pink hair—reminiscent of cotton candy—had tangled into a bird’s nest while she slept. Resignation unbecoming of a child filled her azure eyes, which shone with a rainbow-colored luster. This unusual rainbow light served as proof of her royal blood. Despite this, she wore a coat and pants made of unbleached burlap. These days, not even commoners wore such shabby garments.

Furthermore, the young girl had no true name. After her birth, Emperor Feilong Xin Lei regarded her with scorn. His hateful expression hadn't befitted a father looking at his newborn daughter.

"I will now dispose of *that*," he growled.

Feilong had been unable to forgive his newborn daughter for killing his beloved empress. However, Marfa had prostrated herself. As the crown prince's wet nurse and the empress's close associate, she'd begged him to spare the child. As a result, That hadn't been harmed.

"I'm only allowing her to live," Feilong had declared. "The next time I see her, I'll kill her. Do not ask me for anything more."

When asked his daughter's name, the emperor responded, "*That* will suffice." Thereafter, everyone referred to the princess by that moniker. Even she introduced herself as such.

Still in bed, That let out a soft sigh. She looked down at her right palm. Three white, almond-shaped imprints were on her skin. They resembled a flower, fanning out like radial lines from the center. However, because they were so faint, she doubted anyone else would notice them.

*This must signify the start of the third loop*, That thought, looking down at her palm with empty eyes.

The young girl had a secret—she'd relived her life multiple times. After a series of deaths and resurrections, she'd reached her third loop. In other words, this was her fourth life. During her first loop, one imprint appeared on her palm. During her second loop, another appeared. Now she had three. Presumably, the imprints represented the number of loops.

Throughout her first life, That had been abused for reasons she hadn't understood. Then, at seventeen, she'd been dragged into a coup. Ultimately, one of the rebel soldiers killed her in a fit of battle rage.

*Even though no one ever treated me like a princess, I was still murdered for being one*, That thought, finding it ironic. *How awful. Back then, I longed for a quick death, but I never imagined meeting such a terrible end. Life can be so absurd.*



In her second life, That restarted at the age of fifteen. At seventeen, she'd taken advantage of the coup to escape from the palace. Afterward, she'd lived in the lower city while hiding her identity. Before long, the owners of a bar had taken her in. They'd treated her like family, allowing her to live and work at the establishment. In particular, their three-year-old daughter, Ming Ming, had latched onto That as an older sister. Starved of affection, That had also treated Ming Ming like a younger sister, constantly doting on her.

Life in the lower city had been modest. At the same time, That came to understand the full scope of her abuse. Years in the storehouse robbed her of emotion and expression. Down in the lower city, she'd regained these things and learned what it meant to be human.

Unfortunately, the empire had been in disarray after the rebellion. The coup had only succeeded because the rebels had received aid from the fiends. Mion had shrewdly positioned herself as the archfiend's wife. In the end, the joint rule between humans and fiends ended after ten or so years. Not long afterward, the two races began slaughtering each other.

To restore order, the Xin Lei loyalists dubbed That as the surviving Phantom Princess. Thus, fiends began pursuing her to prevent her from becoming empress. In the end, she'd been found and killed by them at thirty.

*Just when I could finally live as a human, That thought. How awful. And where did they get off calling me the Phantom Princess? I never received a royal education. What did they even expect from me? I just wanted to live a normal life and die a normal death.*

During her third life, That had restarted as a thirteen-year-old. Thanks to the previous loop, she'd known the main culprit behind the coup and the tragic state of the empire after. As such, she'd studied obsessively to prevent the rebellion from happening. Having no instructors, she had to learn by herself.

Eventually, a man appeared and offered to teach her. He'd been kind, intelligent, and ten years older than That. She'd trusted him deeply. In fact, she'd even developed feelings for him. Driven by puppy love, she'd told him about the future coup and asked for his help to stop it. To her dismay, the man had been a supporter of the rebellion. He'd even wanted That to cooperate

with him as a princess after the takeover.

*Did he only ever see me as a tool?* she'd wondered, stunned.

She'd fallen out of love with him instantly. By chance, fiends stumbled upon their argument and killed That. She'd barely been seventeen at the time of her third death.

*This is so painful, That thought. Even though I knew the coup's ringleaders and tried to stop them, did they still succeed? Was the lower city massacred again? Hopefully, nothing bad happened to Ming Ming or anyone else at the bar. I'm so powerless. If only I could stop the coup from happening...*

She was now on her third loop. She closed her small, childlike hand into a fist and opened it again.

*I was murdered, on top of being rejected.* That sighed. *Can't I have some time to be sentimental?*

In her first life, That had resigned herself to abuse. In her next two lives, she'd struggled to survive. Regardless, she'd died every time. She didn't want to continue repeating this sort of life.

At that moment, she heard the latch being undone from outside, and the heavy, wooden door swung open. As That looked towards the door, fresh air and morning light filled her room.

"Are you awake, Princess?" a familiar voice asked.

A kindly-looking woman entered the storehouse, her familiar voice causing That's chest to constrict. During That's first life, this woman had looked after her until she was five. Marfa, the wet nurse, had a plump figure and a gentle voice. Her brown hair was tied into a tight bun.

After That's birth, Marfa had pleaded for the girl's life. She'd served as the empress's handmaid for many years. Both Marfa and the empress hailed from the remote nation of Yule. Marfa had been the only one to accompany the empress from their homeland to the Purple Forbidden Palace. Before her death, the empress herself had ordered Marfa to take care of That as her wet nurse.

"Marfa..." That mumbled, her lips trembling.

*She's alive. She's still here.*

As That reached out her hand, her heart swelled with joy. Smiling, Marfa picked her up. That buried her face in the woman's ample bosom.

"Were you having a bad dream?" Marfa asked, patting That on the back to console her. "It's a day late, but we have something to celebrate. Happy third birthday, Princess."

Upon learning about her recent birthday, That stiffened. As Marfa held her, she looked towards the door. Apart from Marfa, there was usually only one knight—who differed depending on the day—and two palace ladies. However, more servants than usual were present today. These included another elderly knight with a white beard, his young squire, and an unfamiliar palace maidservant.

Their group had gathered this morning to celebrate That's birthday. No one but Marfa and her associates were attending this small party. The empress had died giving birth to That, and thus, the palace would grieve in remembrance of her today.

After her death, the emperor declared a three-year mourning period for his beloved wife. During these years, no one was permitted to celebrate That's birthday. However, with the mourning period ending, Marfa had prepared a small celebration in the storehouse.

Marfa smiled at That, her expression identical to the girl's memories. During That's first life, Marfa was executed when That was five. Of course, Marfa hadn't been alive in the subsequent loops.

According to imperial custom, on their fifth birthdays, princes and princesses had the chance to become full-fledged members of the royal family. By overcoming the Naming Trial, they were recognized as official members of the royal family, granted the last name Xin Lei, and permitted to live within the palace. Those who didn't receive this recognition would take their mother's last name. Likewise, they would become retainers to the emperor as part of their mother's family.

At five, That hadn't even been given a first name, much less a last name. Instead, she'd been given a dagger—the one her grandmother had used to

commit suicide. "I won't kill you, but if you wish to end your life, go ahead and do so," Feilong's gift had implied.

Having fully understood this, Marfa protested the emperor's mercilessness. She was an honest, unaffected woman raised in the countryside. She'd never given much thought to inner-court politics. Thus, she'd been executed for disrespect.

Before her death, the empress had been the lone survivor of a family slain by the former emperor. Since That had no relatives on her mother's side, she hadn't been blessed with a second home. Even so, abandoning a five-year-old girl would have adversely affected the emperor's reputation. Instead, she'd been left to fend for herself in a forgotten storehouse.

After That's fifth birthday, all but one of the palace ladies who'd looked after her had been dismissed. As the one in charge of That's upbringing, the woman had begun to abuse the girl. The bare minimum number of people had provided her with the bare minimum of care. In fact, looking after That implied a demotion or punishment.

"Should we even refer to her as Princess?" the palace lady had asked a guard once. "She wasn't acknowledged as a member of the royal family, after all."

The servants had spoken to each other without any concern about That overhearing.

"The emperor won't kill her, but he doesn't care if she lives either," the palace lady had said on another occasion. "I hope she dies sooner rather than later."

No, That had never lived the life of a princess, but after the age of five, her existence grew even harsher.

"Well then, shall we get you ready, Princess?" Marfa asked.

After sitting That in front of a mirror, she combed out the girl's tangled hair gently and carefully.

"I brought you a present today!" Marfa cried, revealing a white, one-piece dress. Due to the empress's three-year mourning period, That had only been permitted to wear shabby clothes until now. However, because today marked the three-year anniversary of the empress's death, Marfa brought That a new

dress. A lacy petticoat gave the skirt more volume, which That found adorable. This style was common in the remote nation of Yule—her mother's homeland.

Yule and Jinlong had vastly different cultures. In Jinlong, women wore long skirts over robes with belts tied around the bodice. In Yule, women wore one-piece dresses similar to That's gift. Marfa hailed from Yule as well. With the mourning period ended, she'd made a dress similar to what the empress had worn in her youth.

Despite being brand new and crafted from fine materials, the dress sported subdued ornamentation. The budget for That's upbringing was kept to the bare minimum. Thus, Marfa had sewn the pink embroidery herself. Additionally, she wasn't allowed to use anything other than white cloth. To avoid incurring the emperor's displeasure, she'd taken great care to keep the dress inconspicuous. At the same time, she'd tailored the best possible garment for That.

During That's first life, even this paltry budget had been misappropriated after Marfa's death. Before long, That's clothes had become even shabbier. The materials had worsened, and she'd received fewer replacements. Of course, no one had washed or ironed her clothes either. Abandoned, she only received enough food to survive.

Due to her lack of education, That simply accepted her circumstances. She hadn't known anyone else to compare herself to either. And so, as she'd grown increasingly unsightly, people had regarded her with increasing contempt.

During her second life, That fled the coup to live in the lower city. Only then did she realize the strangeness of her circumstances. By studying and learning to groom herself, she'd finally become human. Likewise, she'd learned of the love between parents and children by interacting with Ming Ming and the common folk. Though she'd previously felt unloved, she'd finally been confronted with the full scope of her neglect.

She made so many precious memories in the lower city. Sadly, the aftermath of the coup had disturbed the lives of the common folk. Eventually, fiends attacked the bar where she'd lived and worked. In the end, violence and disease proliferated. Though people were always dissatisfied with the government, the empire had always guaranteed them a certain quality of life

until then.

*If only I could have stopped the rebellion, That had begun to think.*

The maidservant placed breakfast atop the table. The meal even included a small cake, which Marfa must have baked. Only a few people in Jinlong knew how to make a Yule cake.

Palace ladies and knights had gathered in the storehouse to celebrate That's birthday. It was a meager celebration, not befitting a princess. Regardless, it was still That's first ever birthday party. Joy swelled in her chest. After having lived so many lives, she cherished this day all the more.

*But I can't celebrate. My mortal enemy is on her way. The one with connections to the fiends.*

As soon as this thought occurred to her, That bit her lip. The memory of this day was seared into her young mind. Mion—her long-time abuser—would soon arrive. Within moments, she would declare this meager celebration blasphemy against the emperor. The empress's mourning period was scheduled to end three years after her funeral, not three years after her death. Having been raised in the countryside, Marfa didn't know about this custom. The unfortunate consequence was that she'd planned an unsanctioned birthday party for That.

After witnessing this event, Mion would spread malicious rumors throughout the palace. *"That was celebrating her own mother's death,"* she would say. *"She's a natural-born demon."* The palace ladies who defended That would be labeled demons as well.

Learning about these events in her past life had saddened That. However, what grieved her the most was Mion using the empress's death to speak ill of the palace ladies.

*Speaking of which, didn't Marfa hold this celebration in the morning to avoid drawing attention?* That thought. *Even so, Mion still showed up. That's weird, right? This must be a trap.*

"Thanks," That said while smiling at Marfa. "But I don't want to get the dress dirty, so I'll wear it later."



When she accidentally slurred the word *dress*, That's cheeks flushed. *Ugh, three-year-old kids aren't very articulate, are they?*

"But Princess, this is a special occasion," one of the palace ladies said with a beaming smile. "Don't you want to wear this dress as soon as possible? If it gets dirty, we can wash it! You shouldn't eat in your pajamas!"

That narrowed her eyes at the palace lady. This woman had abused her in a past life. During That's toddler years, she hadn't shown signs of being violent, which had led to That's misplaced trust in her.

*I bet she's the one who leaked information to Mion.*

That cocked her head. "But if you wash it, I won't be able to wear it until it dries, right?"

"Just today, you can eat in your pajamas," Marfa said with a laugh. "Well then, shall we have breakfast first? Everyone, come sit down!"

At Marfa's urging, everyone sat at the table, where she'd placed a meager meal and cake for everyone present. As That began eating her cake, the door creaked open.

And so the original scene played out. After being rejected, murdered, and looping for the third time, That had to face off against Mion—the root of all evil.



**ONCE** Mion and her retinue departed, an awkward air hung in the storehouse.

"Princess," Marfa said. "Every time you mentioned getting stung, was that...?" When That nodded silently, Marfa clapped a hand over her mouth. "We have to report this to the emperor at once!"

*No!* That thought in a panic. *If Marfa does that, she'll be executed for disrespecting the emperor!*

"Reporting this to Daddy would be pointless," That said. "He hates me. Please don't overextend yourselves for my sake."

The knights and palace ladies seated at the table looked at her dumbfoundedly.

“Princess...” Marfa mumbled.

“Why would you say such a thing...?” one of the palace ladies asked.

“Did Lady Mion tell you that?” another one asked.

Unsure how to respond, That looked at everyone sitting around the table. After giving the palace ladies a chastising glare, Marfa wrapped That in a tight embrace.

“Understood,” Marfa said. “We won’t report this to the emperor. Even so, there’s no need for you to grow up so fast, Princess.”

Upon hearing those words, a realization dawned over That. Currently, she looked like a three-year-old girl. If she spoke normally, it would sound far too mature for her age.

*I need to start being careful about my speech,* she thought, smiling wordlessly to gloss over the situation.

“You’ll most certainly receive a name on your fifth birthday,” Marfa said. “You’re such a beautiful and clever princess. Everything will be fine—I’m sure of it.”

That smiled bitterly. She probably wouldn’t receive a name, and when that happened—

“If I don’t get a name, don’t be angry, okay?” That urged.

“Of course, I won’t be angry,” Marfa assured her.

“Promise you won’t be angry with Daddy either, okay?”

Seeing Marfa executed for disrespecting the emperor was devastating. Reliving the same experience would be doubly traumatic.

Everyone at the table fell silent.

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt because of me,” she said.

One of the palace ladies began sobbing, and the old knight averted his gaze, wiping his eyes.

*I was ostracized merely for existing,* That thought. *But even in my first life, these kind people took care of me until I turned five. And even after three loops,*

*they're still the same.*

“Promise, okay?” That repeated.

Her words pulled at their heartstrings. Despite being only three years old, she understood her unfortunate position. Yet, rather than being pessimistic, she showed consideration for everyone else. Though she was still young and a victim of misfortune, she was also a natural-born princess. Without a doubt, she had the makings of a ruler.

Before, everyone had viewed That as a pitiful young girl who needed their protection. Now, they regarded her as a future leader. After letting go of That, Marfa took one step back. She then placed her right fist over her chest, covering it with her left hand. This was how one saluted the emperor.

“I will do as you ask, my kind and clever princess,” Marfa said.

In response to her dignified tone, the old knight performed the same salute. At the same time, palace ladies bowed their heads deeply. That’s eyes widened. She didn’t understand this solemn, ceremonial atmosphere.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “You’re all acting weird.”

When That burst out laughing, everyone else followed suit.



**AS** promised, Mion delivered the medicine immediately. It arrived in a gallipot decorated with gold leaf, which indicated it was an important medicine. She’d even included a letter as a show of concern for That.

“Well, Lady Mion certainly came through,” Marfa commented.

“I never expected her to send something so expensive...” a palace lady added.

The women were deeply impressed by Mion’s generosity. However, this medicine generally wasn’t used on children, as it produced a painful stinging sensation. During That’s first life, Mion had applied this ointment to That’s skin each time she’d pinched her. She knew how much it stung.

By providing such an expensive medicine, shrewd Mion had feigned a sincere apology. Of course, That wouldn’t let her get away with it this time.

“Wow!” she cried. “This stuff looks amazing! Have you ever used it, Mishter Knight?”

The old knight—whose body was laced with scars—took the gallipot and examined it. A purple piece of paper with golden writing sealed the lid.

“U-Unbelievable,” he said. “The use of this medicine is forbidden except on the battlefield.”

Marfa looked at him quizzically. “What do you mean? Is it safe for children to use?”

“Not at all!” the old knight shouted, his face turning red with anger. “It’s highly effective and heals wounds quickly but also causes severe pain. Even soldiers are only allowed to use it on the battlefield. You mustn’t let this touch the princess’s skin.”

Marfa paled. “What a thing for Lady Mion to send...”

“She’s a terrifying woman, isn’t she?” a palace lady agreed.

That smiled at the horror-stricken women. “I’m sure Mish Mion didn’t know.”

“No,” the old knight responded decisively. “Someone of Lady Mion’s caliber wouldn’t have been unaware.”

That smiled and cocked her head. “She wouldn’t have sent in on purpose. That would be bullying, right?”

Everyone fell silent. The first seeds of doubt towards Mion had sprouted in their minds.



**AFTER** that incident, Mion fired the palace lady who’d been leaking information to her. Supposedly, the woman was being punished for attempting to frame That. In reality, Mion was making an example of her for relaying incorrect information.

When the storehouse didn’t receive a new servant to fill the vacant position, everyone’s distrust towards Mion deepened. Eventually, Marfa considered filing a complaint.

“Please don’t risk it,” That begged, somehow managing to stop her.

*I can’t give Mion a reason to attack us, she thought. Even if she sends a new palace lady, it’ll definitely be someone loyal to her. I would much rather work just as hard as the missing servant myself.*

And so, That began helping out with the extra work. At first, the palace ladies objected, but after seeing how much fun she was having, they conceded. Owing to her time in the lower city, That wasn’t opposed to working. Though her three-year-old body limited what she could do, she still had the time of her life working with everyone.

She worked happily despite her clumsiness, which warmed the hearts of the knights and the palace ladies. Marfa even made an apron for That, who was so eager to do everything by herself. Apart from cooking Yulan foods, That and Marfa also worked on simple knitting projects together. Meanwhile, the palace ladies also taught That a variety of things. In this way, everyone’s bonds deepened.

## Chapter 2: The Nameless Princess and the Mysterious Knight

**THAT** resided in the Big Dipper Garden. It was in the northernmost part of the North Star Sanctuary, where the emperor dwelt. The artificially constructed garden had, once upon a time, been the site of lavish banquets. However, it had fallen into ruin since the current emperor's grandfather committed suicide there.

A storehouse stood on the northernmost end of the Big Dipper Garden, bordered by a bamboo grove. The storehouse was That's residence. Long ago, a certain princess had been imprisoned within this building. To this day, her locked wicker cabinet and books related to magic remained on the second floor. That had tried unlocking the wicker cabinet many times, but the door had never budged.

The storehouse had one small window near the ceiling with bamboo bars. Likewise, the door was thick and latched from the outside.

Around the time That woke up each morning, Marfa arrived alongside a knight and one palace lady. The knight wasn't there to protect That. Rather, he made sure she never approached the palace. As such, she had no guard during the evening when she couldn't walk around outside.

Because the garden was artificially constructed within the palace, no large beasts roamed its interior. So long as That didn't leave the storehouse, she wouldn't face any danger. On the other hand, a rebel soldier *had* attacked her in her first life. Perhaps she did need protection at night.

*At least the old knight didn't fall victim to the rebel,* she thought.

Since regaining her memories, That had been actively spending time with the knights and palace ladies. Though she hadn't realized it until now, these servants had always treasured her. They treated That like a granddaughter. Being spoken to by their adorable princess always brought a smile to their

faces.

For her part, That enjoyed going on walks and exercising with the old knight. She also chatted with the palace ladies while helping with chores. That was a toddler with no friends and too much time on her hands. None of the adults ever objected when she asked to do something.

Today, That was working up a sweat while exploring the Big Dipper Garden. During the day, she was permitted to walk around the area freely. She did this to build her strength and familiarize herself with the landscape.

The old knight always doted on That. He taught her many things, such as where to find acorns and about the beautiful, wild birds. Nevertheless, she wasn't allowed to enter the bamboo grove for fear of traps. Though none of the knights had said this explicitly, That learned that lesson the hard way. During the first loop, she'd gotten caught in a trap and injured herself when trying to escape.

There was no need for traps; a magical barrier already protected the palace from outside enemies. For her own sadistic enjoyment, Mion had set them to harass That.

Though the Big Dipper Garden had fallen into ruin, traces of its former magnificence remained. Supposedly, the artificial lake once overflowed with liquor. Over the years, however, rainwater had pooled there, lily pads having bloomed on the water's surface. Even the bridge spanning the lake hinted at something once grand despite its crumbling façade. According to the stories, meat once hung from the garden trees as well. Currently, they were overgrown due to a lack of maintenance. Yet, all the same, tree flowers still blossomed in the fullness of their glory, rare fruits ripening on their branches.

In the middle of the garden stood a densely overgrown hill. At the center of it, a large tree with a white trunk and luxurious white leaves towered skyward. Its branches swept in every direction. Under the tree were two bean-shaped stones, perfect for sitting upon. The two side-by-side stones appeared as thrones as dazzling light filtered through the white leaves and branches.

That's eyes sparkled. "That tree is sho pretty!"

"It's called a Guidepost Tree," the old knight explained. "This one isn't



flowering right now, but come nightfall, the flowers of a blooming tree glow with yellow light, providing dim illumination.”

“Wow! When does it bloom?”

“That’s not well known.”

“Huh?”

“Guidepost Trees capable of blooming do so year-round,” the old knight explained. “Ones that don’t bloom remain flowerless year-round. This one bloomed until a little while ago, so it might do so again. It was quite a beautiful sight.”

Today, the old knight—his hair mottled with white—was in charge of guarding That. Of all the knights on rotation, she was closest to him. Whenever they walked together, they looked like grandfather and granddaughter.

The old knight’s expression softened as if he were recalling a happy memory. His hard, scarred face broke out into an almost unbelievable smile.

“A little while ago?” That asked. “When was it?”

The old knight looked skyward as if straining his memory. “I believe it stopped flowering around three or four years ago.”

“Shree years...?”

When That mumbled these words, the old knight started and looked down at her.

“No, I’m mistaken,” he said with a smile, trying to smooth over the implication. “It was probably before then.”

“When Mommy died, the tree stopped blooming?”

The old knight fell silent, unsure how to respond.

“I want to know more about Mommy,” That said. “Please don’t hide things, okay?”

As That stared up at the old knight, he shrugged his shoulders. She’d worn him down easily.

“As you wish, Princess,” he acquiesced, launching into the story. “From what

I've heard, the emperor and empress first met in this garden. At that time, it had already fallen into disuse. Perhaps that suited them perfectly, for they would often come here together. Watching them sit on these two stones and converse with each other was a beautiful, most divine sight."

*My parents met in this rundown garden? That wondered. I never would've guessed.*

"Did Mommy and Daddy get along?" she asked.

"Yes indeed," the old knight responded. "The two seemed very much in love."

"Oh, I see."

That played under the Guidepost Tree for the rest of the day. After picking flowers to make a bouquet, she arranged rocks and leaves into shapes. Meanwhile, the old knight used a branch to scratch a picture into a Guidepost Tree leaf. Once finished, he showed it to That. Guidepost Tree leaves were white and thick. To That's great amusement, grazing one with her nail left a blue line on its surface.

An idea struck That. She took out a handful of acorns stuffed into her pocket and lined them up on the ground. Whenever someone in Jinlong prayed for happiness, they would arrange three ellipses in a radial pattern. People called this the Tianshi's Protective Seal. That had learned of this charm during her first loop. It was the same shape as the imprints on her right palm. After lining up the acorns, she used a branch to scratch characters into the earth and formed a circle around the charm.

"May the Guidepost Tree bloom again someday."

Once she'd finished writing, the old knight called out to her. "Shall we head home soon, Princess?"

"Okay!" The sun was already beginning to set. Smiling, That stood up and caressed the trunk of the Guidepost Tree. "Are you sad because both of them left? Don't worry—I'll come back again soon."

At that moment, a popping sound emanated from the Guidepost Tree. When That looked up in surprise, a milky white blossom in the shape of a hanging bell had appeared on one of the branches. It was about the size of her fist. Before

long, more and more blossoms popped into existence in rapid succession.

“Wow, wow, wow!” That cried.

“Incredible...” the old knight mumbled, looking up at the tree with surprise. “I’ve never seen anything of the sort.”

“Will they start glowing soon?” That asked.

The old knight nodded. “The buds are still hard, but come nightfall, the flowers will swell. The newly bloomed flower petals are translucent, and the yellow pistils in the center emit light.” Following this explanation, the old knight addressed the Guidepost Tree. “Please give a flower to the princess.”

A new bud popped into existence as if the tree consented. The old knight broke off the new bud and handed it to That. “It’s not glowing yet, but as I said, I believe it should start emitting light come nightfall.”

“It’s like a lamp,” That noted.

“Yes, but it will only last for one evening.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” the old knight confirmed. “After a single night, the flower will disappear.”

“How mysterious.”

“It is indeed.”

The old knight and That began walking home in the midst of this conversation.



**THAT** evening, a lone man stood beneath the Guidepost Tree. He placed his hand on the trunk and looked up at the faintly glowing canopy. The light of the flowers gently enfolded him, and his straight, silvery hair blew like silk in the wind. His long bangs were swept over the left side of his face as if to hide his ear. Most striking, however, were his pale, azure eyes. They could have been carved from glaciers, emitting a palpable chill.

This man was Feilong Xin Lei—the emperor of Jinlong and That’s father. He possessed overwhelming magical power and martial strength. Wielding these

weapons, he ruled over this nation and protected his people from the fiends. Feilong had slain the former emperor—his tyrannical father—to usurp the throne. He'd also slaughtered any nobles who refused to follow him, including his own siblings.

As a result, Feilong earned a reputation for being audacious, coldhearted, and ruthless. Even the fiends referred to him as the cruel or savage king. Marriage cooled his temper somewhat, but after losing his beloved empress, his cruelty had redoubled. "With her died all his warmth," the people said.

Earlier today, Feilong had heard about the flowering of the Guidepost Tree. He'd come alone to confirm the rumors for himself. Years ago, he and his beloved empress made many memories here. Following her death, he'd never expected to visit the garden again.

"Why is only this tree blooming?" Feilong muttered to himself.

He bit his lip, his expression bitter. Another Guidepost Tree grew in the main palace garden but hadn't produced any buds since the empress's death.

"I sense something different."

Looking down, Feilong spotted something nostalgic. Someone had arranged acorns into the Tianshi's Protective Seal and drawn a childish charm around it.

"May the Guidepost Tree bloom again," the charm read.

These crude characters had been scratched into the ground using a tree branch. Even so, they glowed with a faint light in the darkness. The lingering fragrance of magic prickled the emperor's nostrils. When a person with magical power crafted a seal, even childish scribbles could contain more potency than a mere charm. Feilong recalled his wife scribbling similar charms beneath this tree.

"Is this why...? No, it can't be. There's not enough magic in this seal to make the flowers bloom."

Feilong looked up at the Guidepost Tree. In any event, this charm appeared to have triggered something. After the empress's death, the Guidepost Trees in the palace garden and the Big Dipper Garden hadn't produced a single flower. Almost as if they'd gone into mourning.

“Who wrote this?”

Of course, no one answered. Only That lived in this garden. If she’d survived, she would only be three years old—far too young to write. Regardless, Feilong cared not whether she still lived. He had no desire to meet, see, or even hear her voice. The idea of breathing the same air as his wife’s murderer disgusted him. If they came into contact for even a moment, he would kill her.

“Do you mean to say the mourning period has ended?”

Though Feilong wasn’t interested in That, he *was* interested in whoever had written these words. If someone close to her was powerful enough to make the Guidepost Tree bloom, he couldn’t ignore them. Even so, he was reluctant to order an official investigation. He didn’t believe this charm alone had caused the tree to flower. Additionally, showing interest in That’s surroundings vexed him.

Breathing a sigh, Feilong composed magical script outside the charm as if to correct the childish writing.

“Exulted Guidepost Tree,” it read, “please give unto me thy resplendent light once more.”

Compared to the original charm, Feilong’s writing glowed several times brighter with magical light. If one used the correct magical script, even a childish charm could become a magic circle.

*How will the person who drew the original charm react? Feilong wondered. I’d like to see for myself. Will they even notice? If they don’t react at all, they’re not worth my time.*

Feilong broke off a branch of the Guidepost Tree and returned to his bedroom.



**THE** next day, That returned to the Guidepost Tree; it had become one of her favorite spots. Outside her original charm, someone had written another charm in magical script. Her eyes sparkled with delight. The average person couldn’t read or write in magical script. Only those who’d studied at the imperial academy were privy to these special characters. Of course, That couldn’t read

them, considering the lives of persecution she'd led.

*This person must have rewritten my original charm in magical script, That thought. After all, the Guidepost Tree looks healthier than it did yesterday. Gah, I would kill to study magical script! Then I'd be able to read the books upstairs!*

Many of the old books were written in magical script on the second floor of the storehouse. They must have belonged to the princess, who'd lived there long ago. Unfortunately, few people could read magical script. Since no one around That could make any sense of the books, they'd been left untouched.

In the past, That had longed to study magical script, but the chances of anyone granting this wish were practically nil. Marfa and the others had no knowledge of the subject. Naturally, she couldn't enroll at the imperial academy either. She wasn't even allowed outside the Big Dipper Garden. Even if she asked for a tutor, her request probably wouldn't be granted.

That didn't want to trouble Marfa with her selfishness. Her desires could wind up killing the people around her, after all. Bearing this in mind, she left a message in regular script next to the magical script.

"Please teach me magical script."

The person who wrote the second charm wouldn't necessarily return here. Even so, That left that message, chancing everything on a small ray of hope. If they didn't know her identity, perhaps they would teach her.



**THE** next day, That raced over to the tree. Someone had left a passage in magical script and an explanation in normal script. That hurriedly copied it onto a Guidepost Tree leaf while her escort knight assumed she was drawing a picture. Once she'd copied it, she left the words *"Thank you"* next to the magical script.

When Feilong returned to the Guidepost Tree that evening, he found words of gratitude written beneath his magical script. Though the reply wasn't in magical script, it still produced a faint glow, oddly enough.

*Did the person who arranged the acorn charm also write this?* Feilong wondered.

To his great surprise, his lips tugged into a smile, a spark of warmth igniting in his heart. After brushing aside his embarrassment, the emperor shook his head, his silver hair fluttering in the night air. He then scratched a new message into the earth in magical script.

So began the communication between father and daughter. Ironically, neither knew the other's identity.









**THE** balmy, early spring breeze carried the sweet and sour aroma of strawberries. Today, That was amusing herself by picking wild strawberries in the Big Dipper Garden. Since no one maintained the garden, the berries were rather small but shone as if bursting with spring sunlight all the same. Fruit was precious to That, as her diet lacked anything sweet. When she suggested taking the strawberries home to make jam, the old knight retrieved an outdated newspaper from his pocket and unfolded it.

The words on the front page startled That.

“Daddy is going on a military campaign?” she asked without thinking. “Are you going too, Mister Knight?”

The old knight regarded her as if she’d just grown a second head.

*Did I say something weird?* That wondered, furrowing her brow.

In a flash, the old knight folded up the strawberries in the newspaper, picked her up, and took off running. “My apologies, Princess!” he shouted.

“Huh?” That asked. “What happened? Did you see an animal?”

The old knight raced back to the storehouse without answering, his eyes as wide as saucers. He set That down in front of Marfa, who looked stunned.

“Did the emperor see her?!” Marfa cried.

The old knight shook his head, his shoulders heaving with each breath. “No, but the princess already knows how to read!”

That gaped at his words. *Oh, right. A three-year-old shouldn’t be able to understand a newspaper, she thought. I accidentally blurted out the topic of that article because I was so surprised.*

“Truly?” Marfa asked.

“Yes, truly,” the old knight replied, pointing to the newspaper. “She seemed to understand the contents of the front page.”

“Princess, could you read this one more time?” Marfa urged.

When That took a reflexive step backward, her back bumped against the old

knight's leg. Shaking her head fervently, she sought his help, but he merely grinned at her.

"Come now, Princess; don't be shy," he encouraged her. "Being able to read is a wonderful thing!"

Faced with such a genuine, pure-hearted smile, That gave up on lying. When Marfa pointed to words in the newspaper, That read them out loud in a faltering voice. Everyone stared at her as she did.

"The emperor... will finally... join the military campaign himself," That recited. "At last, he will end the drawn-out border conflict."

"Do you understand what this means?" Marfa asked.

The woman's intensity made That's hair stand on end. "...Daddy is going to war?" she asked hesitantly.

"We still don't know for certain, but such a plan *has* been set into motion. For some reason, the emperor's personal departure for the battlefield was postponed."

At first, the palace ladies had regarded That with disbelief. Now, their expressions lit up with joy. "She's a genius!" one exclaimed. "The princess is a prodigy!"

"If we report this to His Majesty, then—"

"Calm yourselves," Marfa chided, interrupting the palace ladies as they celebrated. She then took That's hand and asked, "Do you like books, Princess?"

"Yes," That responded.

"Well then, I'll bring some here tomorrow."

As she said this, Marfa smiled, her expression somewhat conflicted. If the princess was too smart, the emperor could view her as a possible threat to the line of succession. That worried her.

*Does Marfa not want me to study?* That wondered.

Even so, the stars had aligned perfectly for her. She couldn't let this opportunity slip past her, regardless of whether it pained Marfa.

“Yay!” That cried. “I love you, Marfa!”

The girl donned an exaggerated smile while hugging her wet nurse.



**THE** next day, Marfa brought a variety of books to the storehouse and began teaching That. Despite Marfa’s worries, knowledge could also end up saving the princess. Should anything ever happen to That, Marfa had resolved to put her life on the line to save the girl.

Marfa brought daily newspapers, books on Jinlong’s history, and etiquette books she’d personally used. Undoubtedly, these books for adults were complex for a three-year-old. Even so, That read them smoothly, as she’d done with the first newspaper. Shock and joy overcame the palace ladies and knights who witnessed this. Afterward, they brought their own books.

That’s day-to-day life was peaceful. Walking and studying became part of her routine, and every day she visited the Guidepost Tree.

*What will today’s magical script be?* she wondered while peering at the usual section of earth. Her escort knight assumed she was drawing a picture, as he always did.

*“I must go to war,”* the latest message read. *“I won’t be able to come here for now.”*

*The person teaching me magical script is a knight? So he’s probably a man.*

That’s chest ached. She regarded him differently from the other knights and palace ladies who cared for her. He was more like a teacher.

*I hope he comes home safely.*

That considered sending a letter to her knight-teacher but didn’t own a pen or paper. She used a secondhand piece of slate and chalk for studying, as pens and paper were expensive. Neither was something you would give a child, much less a persecuted princess.

For a brief moment, That considered her dilemma. The storehouse almost certainly contained scraps of cloth. Using this cloth as paper, she could compose a message in inkberry. If she brought the letter here by tomorrow

morning, her knight-teacher would probably see it.

After coming to that conclusion, That set to work picking inkberries. As its name implied, the fruit's juices could substitute for ink. In her first life, That often stained her white one-piece dress purple when crushing inkberries. "My, my, look what a mess you've made," Marfa and the others would say whenever she did, smiling all the while. Using even more inkberry juice, they would paint a picture onto the dress, incorporating the stain into the design.

On her way home from collecting the berries, That broke off a branch with one bud from the Guidepost Tree. She would use it as a light when returning here in the evening.



**BACK** in the storehouse, That waited for Marfa and the others to leave before slipping out of bed. The knights were tasked with keeping That away from the emperor, not protecting her from enemies. Consequently, she'd been slain all too easily in her first life.

She crushed an inkberry with her fingertip. Using the purple juice, she drew on a scrap of cloth, depicting three lines radiating from the center. Since she couldn't write anything too complicated, she jotted down a single magical character that sprung to mind.

"Protection," it read.

Once finished, she used her undergarments to wipe off the juice on her finger.

That knew of a hole in one corner of the storehouse. The former princess who'd lived here must have dug it up secretly. During That's first loop, she'd discovered the hole and steadily widened it to escape. Not only did it exist in this loop as well, but it was also the perfect size for a three-year-old to slip through. A bamboo hamper had been placed in front of the hole to conceal it. After pushing the hamper aside, That crawled out of the storehouse.

She then headed towards the hill, holding the branch she'd broken off earlier. Thanks to the glow of the Guidepost Tree flowers, she didn't fear getting lost, even at night. No additional magical characters were etched beneath the tree.

When she surveyed her surroundings, she didn't spot another person either.

*Thank goodness, That thought, sighing in relief. My knight-teacher still hasn't come. No one else is here either.*

Knowing That's identity could place her knight-teacher in a difficult position. Upon learning the truth, he might stop teaching her altogether.

First, That set down her branch. She then placed the scrap of cloth on one of the bean-shaped stones beneath the tree. To prevent it from blowing away in the wind, she used a smaller rock as a paperweight. Finally, she knelt down, placed her folded hands on her forehead, and offered a prayer.

"May this protective charm reach my knight-teacher," she prayed earnestly. "May he return home safely."

Her prayer finished, That grabbed her branch, stood up straight, and let out a single yawn. Staying up later than usual had left her fatigued. To shake off her drowsiness, she began running.

*I can't let anyone find me.*



A man waited for That to disappear behind a thicket of trees. Once she was out of sight, he came to stand beneath the Guidepost Tree.

Feilong had decided to return here one more time before heading to the battlefield. However, seeing a pink-haired figure in the Big Dipper Garden paralyzed him. That buoyant, light pink hair was identical to his beloved wife's. An exact replica of the deceased empress in child form ran alone beneath the night sky. Feilong's hand reflexively went to his sword. If she appeared before him for even a moment, he would cut her down.

*That creature must be my daughter,* he thought. *The monster who killed my beloved wife.*

Physicians had warned the empress not to have a second child due to her chronic frailty. Thus, when she'd become pregnant again, Feilong hadn't hesitated to voice his thoughts.

"Your life is more important to me than the child's."

“Half of this child is made of you,” the empress had replied with a sad smile, refusing to acknowledge him. “And I won’t let anyone kill you.”

Less than a year later, That had been born, and her mother died shortly thereafter. The baby girl had been a small, repulsive, and wrinkly creature. Her face shone bright red as she cried. Worse, the empress’s blood had clung to small tufts of pink hair growing from the babe’s hair. Nevertheless, the empress smiled as she cradled the enigmatic creature.

*I still don’t understand why she smiled,* Feilong thought.

“This child will bring you happiness.”

Like a prophetess, the empress had offered Feilong these final words before departing.

*I have no need of this thing,* he’d thought. *My wife should never have died for this monster.*

“I will now dispose of *that*,” he’d said aloud.

As soon as his hand touched his sword, Marfa, the empress’s handmaid, had prostrated herself while cradling the child. “I beg of you, Your Majesty, please spare the girl. She is all that remains of the empress.”

Though Feilong had considered cutting down the handmaid as well, her pleas had caused him to drop his sword. At that moment, he’d recalled his wife’s words.

*“Half of this child is made from you, and I won’t let anyone kill you.”*

*By that logic, isn’t half of this child also made from my wife?*

As soon as that thought occurred to him, he lost his will to slay the child. At the same time, he could never love her. No matter what, he could never quell the loathing that burned inside him.

*And if I ever see her again, I will kill her.*

“Very well—I will allow her to live,” Feilong had told Marfa. “But the next time I see her, I *will* cut her down. Ask nothing more of me.”

*No, I won’t slay her now, but there shall never be a next time,* Feilong had



thought. *If someone else hastens her to an early grave, I won't condemn them. Neither do I care if she runs away or kills herself. I can make no greater compromise.*

The girl he'd vowed to kill upon seeing her a second time was a short distance away. He could draw his sword and cut her down right now. Such a slender neck would easily part from her body. Strangely, however, Feilong didn't move. Instead, he thought back to her kneeling before the stone seat and praying with all her heart.

"May this protective charm reach my knight-teacher," she'd said. "May he return home safely."

Her quiet, high-pitched voice had transformed into faint light and drifted across the night air.

*By "my teacher," was she referring to me? Feilong wondered. Even though we've never met? And she prayed for my safety as I contemplated killing her?*

Feilong never finished unsheathing his half-drawn sword. His whole body didn't so much as twitch, paralyzed.

Once That had finished praying, she raced down the hill as if fleeing an enemy. After she'd faded into the distance, Feilong finally approached the stone. A single scrap of cloth lay atop it. Upon closer inspection, the Tianshi's Protective Seal was written with an inky finger on the cloth. A magical character he'd just taught her was also scrawled on the fabric in thick lines.

*...So, my student was That all along?*

She'd been the one trying to learn magical script. Yet, more importantly, her charm had caused the Guidepost Tree to bloom.

*Is this supposed to be some kind of amulet? Feilong wondered, crumpling the ragged piece of cloth in his fist. Three years have passed since my wife's death, which means my abominable daughter is three years old.*

The girl didn't even own a pen or paper. Regardless, she'd used all her available resources to make this amulet. Feilong carefully unfolded the cloth he'd crumpled up.

*She shouldn't even be able to write. Did she have someone else do it for her? No, this poor handwriting is definitely the work of a child.*

After folding the cloth slightly, Feilong placed it in the breast pocket of his robes.

*She doesn't even have a pen or paper? What is her wet nurse even doing? She has so much potential at the age of three. If someone raised her properly, then... No, I'm the one who never gave her that chance.*

Feilong squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. Though he'd expected to cut That down on sight, he hadn't been able to do so. Even so, he still didn't intend to return her to the palace.

*I'll consider this more deeply when I return from the campaign.*

Perhaps the violence of battle would rid him of hesitation, and the next time he saw his daughter, his desire to kill her would return.

When Feilong looked up at the Guidepost Tree, its light dimmed as if disappointed in him.



**THAT** returned to the storehouse with her branch in hand. "I hope my present makes it to the knight."

As she talked to herself, she considered returning the branch to its vase. Just then, she noticed a faint light leaking from the stairs.

"That's not the moon, right? Is someone there...?"

She'd just been outside, and the moon hadn't been that bright. After timidly climbing the stairs, she hid in the corner and peered into the second-story room. Books written in an ancient language and magical script packed the dust-laden shelf. More importantly, the keyhole of the unopenable wicker cabinet was glowing dimly.

No one was there.

She approached the black-lacquered cabinet on tiptoes. A gold leaf dragon with mother-of-pearl inlay was on the front, and the keyhole was a contraption in the center. Next to the keyhole was a slot in which a single flower could fit.

“This should work perfectly.”

The light from her Guidepost Tree branch had begun to dim. Nonetheless, she inserted it into the slot.

“I need you to glow a little brighter,” That said, patting the flower on the branch and recalling what her knight-teacher had etched onto the ground. Taking a deep breath, she whispered those words as a prayer. “Exulted Guidepost Tree, please give unto me thy resplendent light once more.”

Illumination burst forth from the branch.

“Whoa, that’s bright!”

That reflexively closed her eyes. With a clatter, the keyhole contraption revolved once to reveal a circular star chart.

“Huh?!”

She’d tried opening this cabinet many times, to no avail. She’d even inserted a flower into the slot, but until now, the cabinet had remained silent. Regardless, That stared at the star chart intently. Some of the stars had worn down due to repeated touching.

“This one, this one, and this one. Oh, and this one too.”

At least four stars were worn down, and That examined them intently.

“Oh, wait, is this the Big Dipper?”

After receiving that insight, That traced the Big Dipper on the diagram with her finger, relying on the worn-down stars to guide her. When she touched the last star, all seven glowed simultaneously. A moment later, the diagram spun a few times, and the wicker cabinet door opened.

“Wow!”

The cabinet contained everything from difficult books to beautiful silk fabrics. One green robe was so magnificent that it might have been a wedding garment. Plenty of other expensive items filled the cabinet, such as an incense burner and an ornate headdress whose color hadn’t faded. It was all novel to That. There were a variety of texts as well, ranging from scrolls and diaries to books in magical script.

“I will give you one thing of your choosing,” a feminine voice echoed from the cabinet.

That stared into the depths of the cabinet, but there was no one inside. As she blinked, one of the drawers opened. Soon, a series of drawers opened in quick succession as if telling her to pick from one of them.

An ivory stamp, tortoiseshell glasses, a coral ring, and a brush case with mother-of-pearl inlay caught her eye. There was even a piping hot, peach-shaped manju and a gourd filled with fragrant liquid. Finally, she found a seashell with a crimson-painted interior, an antique mirror, and a small case filled with pills.

That selected a book from the items. It seemed to be a text on military and court etiquette with differing contents from Marfa’s. However, the text was in the inscrutable language characteristic of old books.

*It looks hard to read, That thought. Still, I’m not gonna fail my Naming Trial this time around! I’ll learn everything I can about courtly etiquette and force my father to give me a name!*

During her first life, That had prepared for the Naming Trial exactly as Mion had instructed. However, due to her ineptitude, she hadn’t been recognized as a noblewoman. In the end, she hadn’t even been allowed to meet her father.

“Please let me use this for my studies,” That said.

“Are you certain that’s what you want?” the disembodied voice asked. “I have plenty of other more expensive trinkets.”

“But I need this,” That responded, clutching the book to her chest. “Is that okay?”

“Very well. In that case, I’ll throw in something extra.”

A round, wooden tag fell from the book into That’s arms. The tag—either an amulet or a bookmark—resembled a dragon holding a pearl. A long string was threaded through its hollow center.

“While looking through the hole in this tag, you’ll be able to read any book,” the voice explained.

That did as the voice instructed. When she peered at something through the hole, it appeared brighter and more distinct. What's more, the book's impenetrable contents transformed into easier language.

"No way!" That cried.

When That looked up, the cabinet drawers slammed shut one after another. Apparently, the voice would answer no further questions. The contraption turned of its own accord, and the door locked again.

"What kind of magic is this?" That asked curiously.

The disembodied voice probably belonged to the princess once imprisoned here. For some reason, That was certain of this.

"Thank you, Princess," she said.

She lowered her head and draped the tag around her neck. Owing to her small size, it served perfectly as a pendant. Despite being made from wood, it was warm. While puzzling over that, she removed the Guidepost Tree branch from the slot. Finally, she bowed her head to the wicker cabinet and tottered downstairs once more.

## Chapter 3: The Nameless Princess and the Fluffy Tiger

**AFTER** the imperial army had left on their campaign, That grew visibly despondent. Being unable to converse with her knight-teacher made her lonely. Thus, she spent a great deal of time praying for him to come home safely. To distract herself from her loneliness, she toiled away at her studies, reading the book given to her by the wicker cabinet.

While she helped with laundry one early afternoon, an animal howled deep within the bamboo grove. Long stick in hand, she entered the thicket, where small bamboo shoots peeked out of the ground.

“You mustn’t go in there, Princess!” the old knight called out while chasing after her.

“I’ll be okay,” That responded.

As she advanced, she tapped the ground in front of her with the stick to check for traps. The bamboo tiger traps in the grove had been made to hurt That, not to capture animals or bandits. As such, they were far from lethal. In a previous loop, she’d gotten caught in a trap while fleeing and sustained a minor injury.

As That continued towards the howling animal, the old knight caught up to her, scooping her up. “You mustn’t go any farther than this.”

“But look, there’s a cat over there.” That pointed with her stick.

From this higher vantage point, That could see the cat caught in the tiger trap a short distance away. It was a tabby with orange fur and black stripes. Based on its large size and solid build, it was an adult male. However, considering its glossy fur and golden, hooped earrings, it wasn’t a stray.

The old knight took That’s stick and cleared away the underbrush while approaching the cat. When he set That down, the cat let out a low, threatening growl, its hair standing on end. Its red and gold eyes—reminiscent of flames—burned with rage. That averted her gaze from the cat and held out her hand in front of it.

The cat sniffed That's hand, a suspicious look on its face. She'd learned this trick in a previous loop. The lower city had been home to many stray cats, and this was how people had interacted with them.

"It's okay," That said. "I'm going to remove the trap, so stay still, all right?"

When That reached for the trap pinching the cat's leg, the old knight softly put his hand on hers.

"Allow me to do it," he said.

"Then I'll hold down the cat," That replied.

That held down the cat's side to stop it from running away. Bristling, the cat scratched her hand. A red welt formed on the young girl's soft skin, blood seeping from the feverish wound.

"Princess!" the old knight cried out.

"I'm okay!" That yelped in response.

Somehow, she soothed the knight's panic.

"There are other traps here," she told the cat. "If you run away, you'll only put yourself in more danger. I'm sorry—I know this hurts. It's all my fault."

The tiger traps were there to potentially wound her. Seeing an innocent cat hurt because of her broke That's heart. *I cause trouble for everyone around me just by being alive*, she thought, tears spilling from her eyes.

Involuntarily, the knight averted his gaze from her. Looking at the princess caused him more grief than looking at the cat.

For his part, the cat's bristling hair slowly flattened. He looked up and whined as if apologizing. Smiling, That stroked him under the chin. Rather than showing displeasure, the cat pressed his forehead against her. In response to his demanding attitude, That continued petting him, causing his eyes to narrow blissfully.

*Back in the lower city, I was known as the head pat specialist*, That recalled. *The time I spent doting on Ming Ming and stray fluffballs is paying off!*

"Does that feel nice?" That asked.

The cat purred softly.

*He seems to understand language, That thought. Is he someone's pet cat, after all?*

"Well then, is it okay if I pet you a bunch more?" she asked.

In response, the cat stretched out his neck as if demanding more attention. The old knight took this opportunity to open the tiger trap all at once. He snapped it in half, disgust radiating from his eyes. When That and the cat looked at him with surprise, he shrugged awkwardly.

After the cat's hindleg was freed, That hugged him, which allowed him to lap her cheek.

"Your tongue's so rough," That giggled.

The cat's sandpaper tongue continued to lick her face, causing her soft cheeks to wobble. She couldn't stop laughing. As he watched the charming scene unfold, the old knight laughed as well.

"Ryuho."

A voice echoed inside That's head, prompting her to look around the area.

"My name is Ryuho."

That turned her gaze back on the cat, wondering if *he'd* spoken to her. However, the knight was unresponsive.

"Mishter—"

She tried to call out to the old knight, but the voice interrupted her. "Quiet! You're the only one who can hear me. Let's keep this a secret between you and me, okay?"

"Ryuho?" That asked while looking at the cat.

He meowed in response, his tail straightening upward.

"You should come with me," That suggested with a giddy smile. "You're injured, right? Do you mind if I smear ointment on you?"

"Well, if you give me more head pats, I guess I'll come with you," Ryuho answered.



“And will you let me scritch you lots behind the ears?”

The cat meowed again. Taking that as a yes, That stood while holding him in her arms. Since the cat was large and she was small, he stretched like taffy, his hindlegs still touching the ground.

That looked up at the old knight. “Can I keep him while his injuries heal?”

The old knight smiled and nodded. Since That had been feeling so down lately, seeing her befriend a small animal filled him with joy. After picking up the princess and the cat, he returned to the front of the storehouse. Upon seeing this adorable combination, Marfa and the palace ladies shouted delightedly.

Inside, That smeared ointment on the cat’s hindleg and wrapped a bandage around it.

“What should we call him, Princess?” Marfa asked.

“His name’s Ryuho,” That responded.

“How wonderful. Well then, I’ll make him a bed.”

Marfa brought down an old box and worn-out clothes from the second floor. She placed the clothes over a layer of dried grass, creating a simple bed. Afterward, she went outside to finish her remaining work.

Ryuho kneaded the bed, his expression discontented. He spun around once and laid down. “Hey, what’s your name?” he asked.

That smiled bitterly. “The people here call me Princess, but other people call me That.”

“That?” Ryuho repeated with a laugh, not sounding the least bit malicious. “Weird name. Makes you sound like a thing, not a person.”

“Yeah, it really is weird,” That responded with a dry laugh of her own. “Apparently, my dad didn’t even want to give me a name. He should have just killed me, to begin with.”

Ryuho leapt at That and pushed her down. “Don’t laugh! It’s not funny! You should be crying!”

“But...”

When his words caused That to cry, Ryuho licked the tears from her cheeks. His sandpaper tongue filled her with a sense of relief. This time, she couldn't suppress a genuine laugh.

“Don't laugh,” Ryuho insisted.

“But you're the one who's making me laugh.”

Ryuho slapped her with his tail. “When I get bigger, I'll break you out of here.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it's a promise.” Ryuho wrapped his tail around a lock of That's hair. “My kind makes promises by wrapping our tails together, but you don't have one.”

That nodded, the cat's words making her crack a smile. “Okay, it's a promise.”

Once the day ended, That climbed into bed while Ryuho slept quietly in his box. Until now, she'd spent nights alone. Simply having the presence of another living creature filled her with joy.

The next morning, That woke up enveloped in fluffiness. Another steady heartbeat thumped against her chest, body heat warmed her skin, and orange fur with black stripes filled her vision. Sometime during the night, Ryuho snuck into her bed. In a single night, his injured leg had healed enough for him to make the climb. Smiling, That buried her face in his fur. He smelled like bamboo and the sun.

*This is the scent of adventure,* she thought.

Ryuho purred, his tail slapping That on the back. Clearly, he was in a good mood. This pleasant rhythm caused That to let out a single yawn, and she drifted back to sleep.

That was how That and Ryuho's lives together began.



**AFTER** Ryuho's arrival, That began sleeping much deeper. Being enveloped in fluffiness filled her with so much joy. Just being with him brightened her days,

and she hoped their time together would last forever. However, his injury healed in the blink of an eye. As such, she showed him the hole in the storehouse so that he could return home.

“You can come and go from here freely,” she said.

“Of course,” Ryuho responded, slapping her back with his tail. “I’m as free as a cat can be.”

Despite saying this, he never used the hole.

One day, That and Ryuho were eating at the table together, much like two humans would. That had become their daily routine, per Ryuho’s request. Fortunately, no one was picky about manners in the abandoned storehouse. Since Ryuho had become That’s first and only friend, the palace ladies treated him like a guest of honor. Ryuho was beautiful, brazen, and understood humans. Altogether, he didn’t seem like a mere stray cat.

Marfa cocked her head. “I assumed he was fully grown, but perhaps I was wrong.”

Startled, Ryuho went completely still. Not only did he eat and sleep a great deal, but since coming here, he’d put on quite a bit of weight.

“Could he be a tiger?” Marfa asked. “If so, we won’t be able to keep him much longer...”

As Marfa regarded Ryuho fearfully, That came to his defense. “It’s okay! He’s never bitten me! No matter how big he gets, he’ll always be a good boy!”

“But if he keeps getting bigger, we won’t have enough food to feed him. It would be sad to starve such a good boy.” At this, Marfa frowned. The budget she received for That’s upbringing wasn’t much. “We’re getting by for now,” she continued, “but perhaps we should return Ryuho to his previous owner sooner rather than later.”

That’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t want Ryuho to starve. Maybe you’re right.”

How could Ryuho ever be truly happy with a girl who could be killed at any time? Even so, she couldn’t leave the Big Dipper Garden, so she couldn’t search for his owner.

“Marfa, could you look for Ryuho’s previous owner?” she asked.

Ryuho whined and nudged his forehead against That, expressing his displeasure. Seeing this broke Marfa’s heart, for she liked cats as well. Moreover, she found the combination of a clever cat and a young girl quite charming. If possible, she didn’t want to tear them apart. However, their team of servants wouldn’t be able to take care of Ryuho forever. Keeping him irresponsibly wouldn’t be good for either of them.

“Good idea,” Marfa said. “He’s such a wonderful cat. I’m sure his owners have been waiting for him to come home.”

These words were the only comfort she could give.

That night, Ryuho slipped out of the storehouse. Despite noticing this, That didn’t call out to him. He was a clever cat who understood humans. He must have heard their conversation this afternoon and taken the hint. The day had finally come for him to return home. No matter the depth of her loneliness, That could do nothing to stop him.

*His mom and dad might be waiting for him,* That thought while biting her lip. *He should go home to the people who love him.*

She had no parents to embrace her or await her return home. With Ryuho gone, the bed felt emptier and colder than ever before.

*If I was going to feel this lonely, maybe I shouldn’t have become friends with him in the first place.*

Sniffling, That buried her head in her blanket, curled up into a ball, and tried to force herself to go to sleep. The storehouse seemed darker than it had before Ryuho’s arrival.

A little while later, That felt her blanket being nudged back. Slowly and quietly, she raised her head, finding a pair of red eyes sparkling in the darkness. On most occasions, this would have been frightening, but That let out a sigh of relief. Ryuho had come home.

“Ryuho!” she cried out, clinging to his neck as tears ran down her cheeks. “I thought you’d left forever.”

“You dummy,” he replied, licking away her tears with his sandpaper tongue. “We made a promise, remember?”

Using his forepaws, he pushed a drawstring purse toward her. A letter with an elegant seal was attached to it.

*To whom it may concern,*

*Thank you for rescuing Ryuho. He is a special Nanranese cat that grows very large. However, as you’re probably aware, he understands humans and isn’t dangerous. He seems to have grown quite attached to you. If possible, please care for him as you would a person. The drawstring purse contains money for his food. Please enjoy many scrumptious meals together.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ryuho’s friend*

After she’d finished the letter, That squeezed Ryuho in her arms. “You don’t have to leave me?”

“Of course not. You’re my favorite ear scratcher.”

“Yay! I love you so much, Ryuho!”

“Love you, too.”

Overcome with emotion, Ryuho pushed That over, and the two rolled around playfully on the bed.



**THE** next morning, That showed the letter and drawstring purse to Marfa. Marfa’s eyes widened in surprise. The letter had been written on exquisite, watermarked paper, and the calligraphy was masterful. Though the sender hadn’t introduced themselves, they must have belonged to a noble family. When Marfa opened the drawstring pouch, she found it packed with gold coins.

*They entrusted a cat with this much money?* Marfa wondered. He must come from a wealthy family, indeed.

“As I recall, the nation of Nanran reveres a holy beast called a Flame Tiger,” Marfa said. “True to its name, it’s a tiger with red eyes. According to legend,

anyone to whom this holy beast takes a liking will be blessed. If I had to guess, Ryuho is probably a Flame Tiger.”

“What splendid news, Princess!” a palace lady cried out, positively beaming. “Something wonderful is bound to happen!”

That squeezed Ryuho in her arms. “I’m just happy to have him here.”

When Ryuho nudged his forehead against That’s, she burrowed her face into his. After nuzzling each other for a while, they broke apart, gazed into each other’s eyes, and shared a bunny kiss. Finally, they hugged each other tightly, each one making sure the other would never leave. This supremely charming sight caused tears to form in Marfa’s eyes.



**DURING** their daily walk in the garden, That and the old knight regarded Ryuho fondly. Throughout their stroll, the Flame Tiger nestled up to the girl’s legs like a bodyguard.

Sometime later, That and the old knight took a break beneath the gummy tree. The gummies shone like bright red rubies in the early summer sunlight, seeming to capture and contain its rays.

“They’re the same color as Ryuho’s eyes,” That noted with a delighted laugh.

“And they’re edible,” the old knight said. “Would you like to try one?”

“Of course!” That responded enthusiastically.

Once the knight had lifted That onto his shoulders beneath the tree, she picked one of the vibrant, red gummies and took a bite. “It’s still sour,” she complained, puckering her lips.

The old knight laughed. “They don’t look as appetizing, but the slightly black ones taste better than the red ones.”

“Really?”

“Those are the ripe ones. For the most part, fruits exposed to sunlight are much sweeter.”

Even on the knight’s shoulders, That couldn’t reach any of the ripe, sweet-

looking gummies, no matter how far she extended her arm. She slumped her shoulders in disappointment. Since the gummy tree had thorns, pushing herself too hard could lead to injuries.

“If we wait a little longer, will the ones at the bottom turn black?” she asked.

“Almost certainly,” the knight replied.

Having listened to their conversation, Ryuho began climbing the tree. A flock of brown-eared bulbuls pecking at gummies beat their wings in shock. Meanwhile, Ryuho’s orange tail waved within the abundant greenery of the branches. After bounding up the thorny tree, he grabbed an appetizingly ripe gummy in his mouth. Below, That and the old knight watched, dumbfounded.

*Is Ryuho going to eat one of the gummies too?* That wondered.

As she watched, astonished, the Flame Tiger dropped the gummy towards her. He then whined.

“Catch them,” he said.

When That asked the old knight to set her down, he obliged. She raced to a spot beneath Ryuho, held up her apron, and stood beneath the tree. At the same time, Ryuho used his thick forelegs to shake the tree branch he was standing on. Ripened gummies fell from the tree in a shower, allowing That to catch them in her apron.

“Wow, you’re incredible!” she squealed, grinning from ear to ear.

Ryuho let out a satisfied whine, bound down the tree, and nuzzled his forehead against That. Since gummy leaves and branches had gotten caught in his fur, she sat down and cleaned him off carefully. As she did so, Ryuho whined softly. Perhaps the tree’s thorns had scratched him.

“Does that hurt?” That asked.

Ryuho had climbed through the thorns for her sake, after all.

“I’m fine,” he answered. “More importantly, keep petting me.”

While whining, he placed his head on That’s knees. She had to take off her apron and set it aside since she’d wrapped the gummies in it.

“Good boy, good boy,” she cooed, stroking Ryuho all over. “Pain, pain, go away; come again some other day.”

Ryuho’s fur glowed faintly where That petted him. However, she and the old knight assumed this to be due to the sunlight filtering through the tree. Supremely satisfied, Ryuho sighed through his nose, a purr rumbling in his throat. He rolled onto his back, exposing his belly. Thanks to That’s touch, all his small wounds had healed. Though she possessed healing magic, only Ryuho knew this as of yet.

Overcome with joy, That buried her face in Ryuho’s belly, enjoying his fluffiness while running her hands through his fur.

“I’m so happy,” she mumbled, her eyes half-lidded. “And your fur smells so good.”

“You truly love Ryuho, don’t you, Princess?” the old knight asked.

“Yep, sure do.”

When That lifted her head and giggled, Ryuho smiled back at her. “Love you, too,” he said before prodding her apron with his nose. “C’mon, let’s eat these together.”

That opened her apron and picked up the largest, sweetest-looking gummy. After removing the seed, she gave it to Ryuho. “Here you go!”

Wolfing it down, Ryuho narrowed his eyes in satisfaction and whined. “It’s great. Try one yourself.”

“Sure thing!”

The old knight watched as the princess and her tiger picked fruits from the unfolded apron. The sight warmed his heart. After watching them play a while longer, he led them back to the storehouse with the remaining gummies.



**THAT** and Ryuho were rolling around together as usual when Mion appeared. She’d only brought one handmaid with her today, but upon seeing Ryuho, she screamed theatrically.

“Is that a tiger attacking Princess That?! How dreadful!”



“What does this idiot think she’s looking at?” Ryuho asked, fur bristling and ears pinning back. “There’s no way I’d attack you!”

He let forth a low growl to intimidate Mion, the violent swishing of his tail indicative of his anger.

“How terrifying!” Mion exclaimed. “Why is no one helping you?! Where’s your knight?! What on earth is your wet nurse doing?!”

Mion herself merely raised her voice, making no move to help That.

“No!” That cried out in a panic, squeezing Ryuho in her arms to protect him. “He’s my friend!” She stroked his fur to calm him down, for he seemed liable to lunge at Mion at any moment. Before long, he started purring, his raised hackles flattening once more.

“Your friend?” Mion repeated, vexed by how well the tiger had taken to the girl. “Whatever the case may be, the idea of you keeping a tiger without His Majesty’s permission frightens me. You might even be suspected of plotting something sinister.”

“He’s not a tiger!” That shouted back.

Ignoring this, Mion turned her troubled expression on Marfa. “Even if he’s not a tiger, how do you plan on feeding such a large cat? You wouldn’t dare misappropriate Princess That’s budget, I presume?”

Mion had just revealed her hand. After hearing the rumors of That keeping a large cat, the chief lady in waiting had planned to frame her again.

“Actually, the owners of this cat entrusted us with him,” Marfa said, smiling at Mion. “They even gave us money for food.”

*A likely story,* Mion thought with a snort.

“I see,” she said out loud. “But how do you hope to explain this without proof?”

Marfa handed her the letter brought to them by Ryuho. “We do have proof, my lady.”

“Ah, I see...”

Mion groaned upon seeing the high-quality paper. Not only was the penmanship exquisite, but it also contained a Nanranese watermark.

*Could the Nanranese royal family be involved in this?* Mion wondered, her skin prickling with irritation. *I have to assume the worst.*

“How did this even happen in the first place?” she asked. “*That* didn’t leave the Big Dipper Garden without permission, did she? I would have to report such an incident to His Majesty.”

“The princess saved the cat inside the bamboo grove,” the old knight replied.

“...The bamboo grove?” Mion repeated dubiously.

“Indeed. Since the Big Dipper Garden isn’t off-limits, people sometimes enter from the palace side. This cat must have wandered in from there as well. The princess found and rescued him after he got caught in a trap inside the grove.”

*This is turning into more trouble than it’s worth,* Mion thought, her face scrunching up. *I can’t let anyone know about one of my illegal traps injuring a foreign noble’s pet.*

“It’s fortunate that the princess discovered him,” the old knight continued. “Based on the letter he brought back, this cat appears to belong to a noble family. Him dying in that trap could have turned into a political disaster. And anyhow, there’s no need to set tiger traps within these grounds, as a magical barrier surrounds the entire palace. Whoever set that trap should be criminally charged.”

“You’re exactly right,” Mion replied, nodding in an exaggerated fashion. “I’ll have to check and see if there are any more.”

“You’re not ordering us to perform the search?” the old knight asked suspiciously.

Mion donned a kind smile. She couldn’t allow That’s guardian knight to get ahold of any incriminating evidence.

“I can’t ask a knight of Princess That to perform odd jobs,” Mion said. “As the chief lady in waiting, I’m in charge of managing the palace. I’ll perform a thorough investigation.”

With that, she turned on her heel and walked away.

“About the ca—” Marfa called out to her back.

“You may do whatever you wish with the cat,” Mion interrupted coldly. “However, I’ll have to report any misappropriations of the budget to His Majesty.”

Ryuhō bristled, his tail puffing up. “She’s the one who set the trap, isn’t she?!”

That embraced him tighter, stopping him from baring his fangs and pouncing. “Bad boy, Ryuhō! Stay back!”

“That’s right,” Mion said with a smile. “If your cat causes any problems, you’ll be the one to take responsibility. Since you’re keeping him, make sure to train him properly.”

That squeezed her arms around Ryuhō’s neck. “Thank you, Mion!” she cried out as the woman stormed off.

“Why are you bowing your head to that woman?” Ryuhō grumbled. “I can’t stand her!”

“She’s the chief lady in waiting. If we disobey her, we’ll be punished. I’m sorry, but you need to restrain yourself.”

That buried her face in Ryuhō’s back to distract herself from her frustration. Her words broke the hearts of Marfa and the other servants.

*The princess understands everything,* Marfa thought, hugging both her and Ryuhō. *And she’s even trying to prevent any harm from befalling us.*

“Until now, Lady Mion claimed that everything was for the princess’s sake, and I believed her,” the old knight said. “But is that the truth of the matter?”

Lately, Marfa had begun to doubt Mion as well.

Whenever she complained about That’s dire scarcity, Mion would smile kindly and reply, “Please be patient. Everything I’m doing is for the princess’s benefit.” Though Marfa had believed Mion, That’s budget hadn’t changed since she was a baby. Likewise, none of the ingredients delivered to the storehouse were suitable for a child. Marfa had expected That’s circumstances would improve once the mourning period ended, but there were still no signs of anything

changing.

*Could Mion have been lying from the beginning? Marfa wondered. Was none of this for the princess's benefit?*

Mion was the single person connecting That to the palace. All messages went through her.

*If I can't trust Mion, what can I do to ensure the princess's safety? I probably can't protect her all by myself...*

"Regardless of Mion's intentions, we'll protect the princess," Marfa said.

The old knight nodded silently. Their hearts were aligned on this matter.



**MION** had to suppress the frustration welling up inside her. At long last, she'd found a reason to punish Marfa, but her attempt had ended in failure. Worse, she hadn't expected the issue of the tiger traps to come up.

*And that animal was no mere cat, Mion thought. I'd rather avoid a political disaster with Nanran.*

Nanran was a large nation bordering Jinlong to the south. Per an agreement from the previous war, Nanran had offered a hostage to Jinlong. A Nanran princess now resided in the section of the palace housing such hostages. Despite this arrangement, Jinlong still couldn't afford to make light of Nanran.

After hurrying back to the palace, Mion set to work, having the tiger traps disposed of. What's more, she even spun it as her own meritorious deed.

"Apparently, there were traps in the bamboo grove dating back to the former princess's imprisonment," the people said. "Lady Mion found them and had them removed!"

No one in the palace distrusted Mion, and no one disobeyed her. Regardless of her treatment of That, she was the prime minister's niece and a skilled manager of the inner court. Prime Minister Tomi had supported the current emperor, who'd previously been last in line for succession. Without Tomi's support, the current Jinlong Empire wouldn't exist. Furthermore, the prime minister's family was one of Feilong's few allies. He'd punished many noble

families following his usurpation, after all. Since becoming emperor, he'd entrusted practical business affairs to the prime minister's family.

"I can't allow That to form political ties to Nanran through a cat of all things," Mion muttered to herself. "The girl's a nuisance. I must rid myself of her."

## Chapter 4: The Nameless Princess and the Golden Dragon

**EARLY** in the morning, That slipped out of the Big Dipper Garden riding on Ryuho's back. The Flame Tiger had grown large enough to carry her without issue. In her previous lives, That had eked out a meager existence in the garden. This time would be different.

*I'm probably going to die whether I run or hide, she thought. In that case, I should take any possible action to ensure my survival. And since my knight-teacher is out on a campaign, I'll have to study myself.*

Thanks to her memories from previous loops, That could read, write, and do arithmetic as well as the average adult. Upon realizing this, Marfa brought a number of books from her house to educate That as best she could. Unfortunately, Marfa's knowledge was fairly lacking in some areas, such as the etiquette of young noblewomen.

*There's so much more I want to learn—magic and the present state of the empire, for instance. And if I learn magic, I might be able to escape from here.*

When looking through the wooden tag she'd received from the wicker cabinet, That could even understand difficult books. Thus, she'd been watching and waiting for an opportunity to learn more magic.

*Right now, the emperor is out on campaign, and Mion is on break. This is my chance to go to the library! I'll study magical script on my own and surprise my teacher when he comes back!*

Despite being open to all palace residents, The Big Dipper Garden had fallen into terrible ruin. Nowadays, only eccentrics looking to test their nerves ever visited the place. That herself never left the garden, as the emperor had vowed to kill her on sight. So she always fled upon glimpsing anyone unfamiliar.

This early in the morning, no knights or palace ladies accompanied That. Dressed in her white one-piece, she rode Ryuho through the dense fog of the

garden. The air was chokingly heavy with the scent of cape jasmine. Only the chirping of lesser cuckoos echoed inside the all-encompassing shroud of mist. Luckily, no palace knights caught sight of That's small form. Perhaps the Tianshi's Protective Seal engraved on her right palm kept her hidden.

She headed for the library. Supposedly, a dragon stood guard at the entrance, disallowing entry to anyone but the royal family. Would the dragon grant her access? She didn't know, but it was worth trying.

Eventually, she stopped before a large door. A golden pillar somewhat taller than her stood before the entrance. Though a serpentine dragon holding a crystal ball was engraved on the pillar, That couldn't sense any actual living creatures.

"What should I do...?" she mumbled. "Were the rumors untrue?"

"Something wrong?" Ryuho asked.

"I heard there was an actual dragon here, but I don't see him. How am I supposed to get in?"

Unsure what else to do, That placed one hand on the dragon's crystal ball. She stood on tiptoes to meet the dragon's gaze, petting him gently between his two horns. "Do you know how I'm supposed to get in?" she asked in a mumble. Upon realizing the absurdity of her actions, she cracked a smile. "Just kidding."

The dragon's eyes lit up. At the same time, the seal on That's right palm shone with red light.

"Insolent girl!" the dragon boomed. "How dare you touch my head!"

A gust of wind thrust That backward. The dragon's terrifying roar vibrated all the way down to her lower abdomen. Overcome with shock, she took a reflexive step back. The Golden Dragon was no sculpture. After twisting around the column once, it came to stand in front of her. Though the creature's eyes were as black as the night sky, a cold flame dwelt within them.

Ryuho leapt in front of That, hackles raised, and tail puffed up to twice its size. As the Flame Tiger let forth an intimidating growl, the Golden Dragon glanced in his direction.

“I’m sorry,” That apologized, hastily bowing her head. “I didn’t know. Please forgive me.”

“You dare make such excuses?” the dragon asked. “Your eyes contain the rainbow luster of the royal family. Moreover, the Tianshi’s Protective Seal is imprinted on your right hand. You should have been taught how to show me the proper respect!”

Clearly, That’s apology hadn’t quelled his rage.

“My most humble apologies,” she insisted. “I haven’t received such an education, as I haven’t been recognized as part of the royal family. I came here without permission. Please forgive me.”

She knelt before the Golden Dragon, pressing her forehead against the ground. Due to her extreme terror, she’d forgotten to speak like a child.

“Imbecile!” the dragon roared, even more incensed. “A daughter of the royal family shouldn’t kowtow so easily!”

As That’s head jolted up, the Golden Dragon scrutinized her features. Upon further inspection, he realized she was quite young.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Three years old, Your Holiness,” That answered.

“Three years old? And you can speak so maturely? Oh, it must be due to the Tianshi’s Protective Seal.” The Golden Dragon nodded, satisfied with his own assessment. “Certainly, you don’t appear old enough to have received the imperial seal. Nevertheless, you should have been taught at least *some* decorum at your age.” Pausing, the Golden Dragon stared at That intently. “What is your name, child?”

“My name is...”

That faltered. She didn’t have a true name, after all.

“I will ask one more time,” the dragon spoke in a deep, dignified voice. “What is your name, child?”

That straightened her back and considered the question.



*My name? That isn't a true name. Marfa and the others don't address me as That, either. Maybe it's high time I stopped thinking of myself as an object, too.*

"I don't have a name," she answered clearly.

"What's this?" the dragon asked. "A daughter of the emperor has no name? Impossible."

*Father doesn't recognize me as his daughter, That thought, biting her lip. That's why he never even gave me a name.*

"I'm not the emperor's daughter," she said.

"You mean to deceive me?!" the Golden Dragon bellowed. "You *are* the emperor's daughter! State your name!"

"...I truly don't have a name," That replied weakly, hanging her head.

In response, the Golden Dragon asked his next question much more quietly. "Why is that?"

"Because no one ever gave me one."

That lowered her head more. Her mother had died, and her father didn't love her. No, her father despised her to the point of not giving her a name. Over the course of three lives, he'd only ever shunned her. Despite the number of times she'd looped, she had yet to see him in the flesh.

As That continued to bite her lip, the Golden Dragon patted her head with his tail. He could sense the truth of her words.

"I see," he said. "Then I will guide you through the library, Princess."

When the dragon raised his crystal ball before the large door, it opened with a heavy rumble. After he'd flown into the library, That and Ryuho chased after him.

"What do you wish to learn at such a young age?" the dragon asked.

"Are there any textbooks on magical script?" That asked. "Oh, and I'd like to know more about the empire. But, to be honest, I'm not exactly sure *what* I should read."

"And why is that?"

“At this rate, I won’t be recognized as a member of the royal family on my fifth birthday. If I don’t have a name, I’ll likely be killed eventually. I want to grow strong enough to survive on my own.”

The Golden Dragon regarded the princess fondly. She shouldn’t have attempted to pass through the Dragon’s Gate in the first place. The door only opened for those recognized as royalty on their fifth birthdays, after all. Nevertheless, this girl hadn’t even been taught such basic knowledge. As such, the dragon didn’t have high expectations for her future education. By rights, she should have been loved unconditionally, but instead, she was seeking the strength to survive on her own. Looking at her pained the Golden Dragon, and thus, he decided to help her.

That, however, didn’t understand what the look in his eyes meant.

“Here’s where you should start,” the dragon said.

He led them to a bookshelf filled with thick tomes. Upon seeing this, That’s legs nearly gave out from beneath her. She wouldn’t be able to read all these books in such a short period of time. Likewise, she didn’t know when the next foggy day would arrive. As panic swelled in her chest, she bit her nails.

“I can’t check them out, can I...?” she asked.

“You can indeed,” the dragon responded. “You’re a princess, and I’m giving you permission. No one will be able to rebuke you.”

Nodding, That picked out a single book.

“Will one text suffice?” the dragon asked.

“If I want to remain hidden while I return home, I can only carry one,” That replied.

“Then I’ll carry you on my back. Take as many tomes as you like and leave this place with your head held high.”

“But won’t that cause trouble for you, Mishter Dragon?”

“I’m not afraid of Feilong—the little whelp.” The Golden Dragon laughed, addressing the emperor in a most disrespectful manner. “If he complains, I’ll feast upon those icy blue eyes of his. That should certainly quench my thirst.”

That couldn't contain a laugh. She decided to trust the dragon. At any rate, she wouldn't be able to change the future if she continued running away from her father, as she'd done until now. Furthermore, if she couldn't receive a name on her fifth birthday, perhaps being executed before then would be preferable. That way, Marfa wouldn't be put to death.

Taking the dragon's advice, That selected three books. Afterward, the serpentine creature suddenly grew larger and presented his back to her.

"Hop on," he said.

As commanded, both That and Ryuho climbed onto the dragon's back. Once again, the heavy door opened, allowing bright sunlight to stream through the portal. The fog had dissipated, and That had to shield her eyes from the dazzling light.

"Wow, it's so bright!" she squealed.

In response to her cry of amazement, the dragon's back undulated like an earthquake. He was laughing. "Precisely," he agreed. "The world is a much brighter place than you think." When That nodded, he continued, "Place the books between your chest and my back. Hold on tight."

"Okay!"

That wrapped her arms around the dragon in a tight embrace. Once sure of her grip, the dragon took flight. After slipping through the door, he soared towards the heavens, and in the midst of the morning chill, he circled the air above the palace. That marveled at the brand-new scenery. Before, she'd only been able to sneak glimpses of the bright palace grounds through the trees. She couldn't allow the patrolling soldiers to spot her, after all.

*It looks so massive from above,* she thought.

Out loud, she whooped, "Wow, this is incredible!"

The dragon launched into an explanation. "This entire square surrounded by the bamboo forest is called the Purple Forbidden Palace. The large road on the western side is the town where retainers and other officials live. The eastern side is the former inner court, called the Canopy of the Emperor, or the Canopy for short. It is named for the sixteen stars that overhang the North Star. When

Feilong became emperor, he abolished the inner court. Now, it is home to important people from various countries. Hostages, in other words.”

“Hostages...?” That repeated.

“Despite what images the word might invoke, their lives are relatively pleasant. Generally, they’re free to roam the palace grounds, and their children receive a Jinlongian education. When they return to their homelands, they spread our empire’s culture.”

“I see.”

That scrutinized the palace grounds. There were a variety of buildings, gardens, and other amenities. Likewise, there were large roads and waterways. The beautifully constructed Canopy seemed a far more pleasant place to live than the Big Dipper Garden.

“Notice the nine-story pagoda rising from the square lake in the center of the grounds,” the dragon continued. “That is the Celestial Axe Tower, where administrative work takes place. In astrology, the Celestial Axe is a group of stars representing good fortune and sometimes tianshi—heavenly messengers. Beyond the tower is the North Star Sanctuary, where the royal family resides.”

The North Star Sanctuary was a row of splendid buildings with black walls and red-tiled roofs. All sparkled with gold ornamentation, and there were several beautiful gardens as well. In contrast, That lived in a tiny storehouse in a forgotten garden.

The Golden Dragon circled the cloudless, blue sky above the palace. Far below, patrolling soldiers looked up and pointed, for the dragon was said to be an auspicious omen. Some had never seen the dragon before and considered him a legend. Yet now, he flew above their heads, causing an uproar throughout the palace.

“Wh-What should we do?” That stammered. “My cover’s blown. I could die for this!”

The dragon glanced back at the anxious girl and laughed. “Come now, do you think mere soldiers could punish someone riding upon *my* back?”

“But...”

“Are you that worried, child?”

Truthfully, That cared little about her own death. Nonetheless, she didn’t want soldiers firing arrows at Ryuho as well.

“I am,” she confirmed.

“In that case, I’ll let you down in an area where soldiers can’t enter,” the dragon said.

After performing three sweeping, ostentatious spins, he descended towards the North Star Sanctuary.

“Oh no!” That yelped. “That’s not where I live!”

The dragon chuckled. “I’m well aware of that, Nameless Princess.”

“The emperor is going to be furious with me!”

The dragon alighted in a garden behind the sanctuary. “He’s not here right now.”

The simple garden was reminiscent of a field overgrown with small flowers. Morning dew still clung to dandelion fluff, causing the flowers to droop. More importantly, a large Guidepost Tree stood at the top of a manmade hill. However, it had no blossoms.

“What a beautiful garden,” That said, overcome with wonder.

“This is the Guidepost Tree Garden—the royal family’s private garden,” the dragon explained. “Most likely, no one will come looking for you here, as soldiers can’t enter this place, and Feilong is absent. Now then, join me. I’ll help fill the gaps in your knowledge.”

When his passengers had climbed off him, The Golden Dragon flew over to the Guidepost Tree. While lying on his belly underneath the canopy, he tapped his side with his tail. As That and Ryuho sat down next to him, he coiled around them like a snake, his scales touching That’s arm.

*His scales are cool and smooth, she thought. They feel so nice...*

Ryuho nudged his forehead against her and yawned. In contrast, he was as warm as ever.

The eventful day had made That nervous, but as the dragon enfolded her, she let out a sigh of relief. Opening a book, she looked at the pages through her wooden tag and asked the dragon to help teach her. Upon seeing the wooden tag, the dragon's eyes widened slightly in surprise. Yet after a moment, he nodded in satisfaction.

"You managed to open the wicker cabinet?" he asked.

"I did," That replied.

"And what did you choose?"

"A book."

"I see," the dragon said. "You will have an abundance of whatever you choose from the cabinet for the rest of your life. If you desire knowledge, it shall always be yours."

"Really?!"

The dragon laughed. "Would you have rather chosen gemstones?"

"No," That replied, smiling and shaking her head. "Gemstones are meaningless if I don't survive, no matter their number."

"Indeed. This must be why we met."

That regarded the dragon, puzzled.

"Now then, what would you like to learn?" he asked.

"Well, for starters..."

The Golden Dragon answered all of That's questions in a gentle and pleasant tone. Most surprisingly, he spoke of ancient history as if he'd personally experienced it.

"You know everything, don't you?" That asked.

"I know much, and yet I don't understand the hearts of people."

His curt response coaxed a laugh from That. "Neither do I."

Having spoken these words, she let out a yawn. Not only had she woken up early this morning, but she also had the body of a three-year-old. Fatigue had

caught up with her.

“Perhaps you should sleep for a little while,” the dragon suggested.

She drifted off immediately, giving no indication whether she’d heard him. The dragon observed the sleeping girl closely, his expression contemplative. What child had to worry about being executed at such a tender age? His heart ached for her. With a crack, he broke off one of his own scales and pressed it behind her left ear.

“I give you this,” he said.

Though the scale sank into That’s flesh, it didn’t disappear. Rather, it showed through her skin, emitting a golden sparkle.

His eyes wide with shock, Ryuho growled. The dragon merely looked at him and laughed.

“This is called the Inverted Scale, young Flame Tiger,” he explained. “On their fifth birthdays, those recognized as royalty receive this as well as the emperor’s last name. The Inverted Scale is proof that one belongs to the line of succession. With this in her ear, no one will be able to lay a hand on the princess lightly.” When Ryuho stopped growling, the dragon added, “I can’t always be at her side, after all.”

“Then I’ll protect her,” Ryuho responded curtly.

The dragon chuckled. “Yes, I’m counting on you.”

The Flame Tiger huffed in displeasure, slapping his tail against the ground.

## Chapter 5: The Nameless Princess and the Crown Prince

**CROWN** Prince Kyril had turned eleven this year. He was eight years older than his little sister. Alongside their coming-of-age ceremonies, noble children in Jinlong also underwent an examination at ten to measure their abilities. Kyril had received exceptional marks last year, and his abilities had been acknowledged throughout the empire.

Kyril was a handsome boy who resembled his father. Though he and the emperor both had silver hair, he'd inherited the soft waviness from his mother. Since wavy hair was rare in Jinlong, this confirmed his mixed heritage. He had thin lips, a strong nose, and upturned eyes that radiated chilliness. Nevertheless, his round cheeks retained a trace of youthfulness. A rainbow luster glittered within the depths of his clear, blue eyes, which could have been carved from glaciers.

Despite his youth, Kyril had a sharp mind. While his father was out on a campaign, he'd been entrusted with several jobs as the acting emperor. During this time, he'd received a strange report.

"Early this morning, multiple soldiers spotted a dragon circling the palace, a tianshi on his back."

*That's impossible,* Kyril had thought.

Dragons were mythical creatures symbolic of the royal family. These holy beasts were even said to protect them. As such, statues of dragons always guarded doors accessible only to the royal family. Long ago, an enchantment had been placed on these doors to prevent anyone else from entering. However, no living, breathing dragons actually guarded them. That was common sense, even for children.

*They couldn't have seen a dragon,* Kyril thought. *And there was supposedly a tianshi riding it? Was everyone suffering from a group hallucination? The fog was dense today. Perhaps they mistook the sun for something more.*



Nevertheless, Kyril visited the sanctuary's private garden for himself. He'd received multiple trustworthy accounts from eyewitnesses, after all. What's more, he was in charge today. In the absence of an empress and princess, Mion held the greatest authority in the inner court. Unfortunately, the chief lady in waiting wasn't here today either.

And so Kyril entered the garden alongside the high commander of the knights. There, they bore witness to the unbelievable. In the middle of the garden, a dragon and a young girl were dozing off together.

The dragon shone with golden light beneath the sparkling rays of the morning sun. Two figures nestled against his stomach: a small, sleeping girl with pink hair and a large, orange cat. As the dragon played with the girl's buoyant hair with one hand, his tail danced back and forth, indicating his good mood. Three heavy books lay next to the girl. Though two were stacked, one was open, a Guidepost leaf having fallen on its pages. The sight was as beautiful as any religious painting.

The girl's hair was long, buoyant, and the color of cherry blossoms. It reminded Kyril of the deceased empress's hair, as ephemeral as the wispiest of clouds. In contrast to her hair, the girl wore a plain white, one-piece dress. The cotton gown was somewhat oversized and not at all suited for nobility. Nevertheless, the dress was tailored in the Yulan fashion. Nowadays, no one wore this design, which originated from the empress's homeland.

Kyril and the high commander observed the girl with bated breath, for they knew her identity. However, if she *was* That, the high commander would have to dispose of her. He didn't want to harm such a young girl. Though the emperor had ostracized her, she was still a princess. Moreover, she was only three years old. Even as part of his job, he wanted to avoid killing an innocent child.

"She..." Kyril mumbled, trailing off, dumbfounded.

The high commander's heart seized with terror. "She... what, my prince?"

Kyril struggled to believe his own eyes. Who was this girl being enveloped by the mythical dragon—the holy beast who protected the royal family? She must have been his little sister, whom he'd never seen before. The emperor hadn't

merely forbidden her from entering the palace. No, he'd also ordered her to be executed if he ever laid eyes on her. This girl had stolen Kyril's mother and even taken away Marfa, who'd once been his wet nurse.

Arresting her would be the correct thing to do, but Kyril wanted to see her wake up. The girl's sleeping face resembled his mother's, stirring a sense of yearning within him. Were her eyes the same color? What did her voice sound like?

Memories of his mother came flooding back to Kyril. Every day, he'd press his ear against her swollen belly and call out the name of the child inside. For some reason, his mother believed the child to be a girl with no uncertainty. Thus, she'd given her daughter a Yulan name—one barely known to the people of Jinlong.

"Your name means God in Yulan," Kyril's mother had told him. "And so, I want you to protect your little sister—the tianshi."

*It's as if Mother knew she would die, Kyril thought. And I broke my promise to her. I couldn't protect my little sister. Forgive me.*

Kyril silently mouthed That's true name, given to her by their mother. However, he dared not speak it aloud. The emperor had refused to give That a proper name, and Kyril couldn't defy his father.

*If I report this to Father, he'll probably order her execution. And who would be the one to kill her?*

"Who do you think that child is?"

When Kyril looked up at him, the high commander met his gaze. "According to the reports, she's a tianshi," he answered with a serious expression. "As for the cat, he appears to be a mythical Flame Tiger cub. Such holy beasts are said to dwell in Nanran."

"A Golden Dragon *and* a Flame Tiger...?"

Kyril fell into contemplation. At the very least, this young girl had two mythical holy beasts accompanying her. It would be best to tread carefully.

The high commander didn't want to acknowledge That for who she was. He

wouldn't have to arrest her if she wasn't the princess. The soldiers who'd discovered her must have felt the same way. As such, they'd deliberately referred to her as a tianshi in their reports.

*Father's not here today, Kyril thought. Lady Mion usually manages the inner court, and she's absent as well. Could I have asked for better fortune? Or is this also the will of the Golden Dragon? Either way, it's clear what I should do.*

"Tianshi..." Kyril repeated the word out loud, his shoulders relaxing.

*She certainly is a tianshi. Mother called her one as well. And anyway, how could such an adorable little creature be human?*

"This child looks like a tianshi to you as well?" Kyril asked.

The high commander nodded fervently, his expression still serious. "She does indeed."

"Then we're in agreement—this girl is clearly a tianshi."

Upon hearing Kyril's declaration, the high commander breathed a sigh of relief. "And in that case, she's innocent of any crime."

Of course, neither truly believed that the girl was a tianshi. Yet if they referred to her as such, she could avoid punishment. This was their implicit understanding.

Kyril attempted to approach the dragon soundlessly. Sensing the boy's presence, the dragon's tail stiffened. The mythical creature lowered its horns toward the prince, its black eyes appraising him. Undaunted, Kyril continued towards That, extending a hand towards her peach-like cheek.

*Could she really be a tianshi? he wondered. Do such beings actually exist?*

When Kyril attempted to graze That's cheek, the dragon thumped its tail against the ground in warning. Startled, Kyril pulled back his hand. At the same time, That's eyes also shot open. Ice blue eyes stared into sky blue eyes, both sets sparkling with rainbow luster.

Gasping, That jumped onto the dragon's back, followed by Ryuho.

"Tianshi!" Kyril cried out, reaching out to grab her.

Ignoring this, the dragon took flight.

“Please wait, Tianshi!” Kyril cried out again, his words disappearing into the sky.

Only three books and a Guidepost leaf remained. Kyril picked up the books, which no three-year-old should have been able to read. Furthermore, the Guidepost leaf seemed to have notes written on it. Wordlessly, Kyril showed them to the high commander, who couldn’t conceal his bewilderment. This clearly wasn’t the behavior of a toddler.

“Incredible...” the high commander mumbled.

Kyril nodded. Letting such intelligence go to waste would be criminal.

“First, we’ll publicly announce the appearance of the Golden Dragon,” he said. “This is an auspicious omen. And when he returns, we’ll inform His Majesty of the Golden Dragon, the Flame Tiger, *and* the tianshi.”

“Yes, my prince.”

“Finally, I’ll take the tianshi into my protective custody.”

“You’re bringing her to the palace?!”

Kyril’s hand tightened into a fist. “You saw her threadbare clothes, didn’t you? Though I didn’t know any better, I left her in that pitiful state. I trust Lady Mion, but she’s a stickler for the rules. Look what’s become of that poor girl, even without malicious intent.”

The high commander nodded. When he took in That’s pitiful appearance, his heart ached for her as well. Even so, Kyril didn’t suspect Mion of any wrongdoing. In his mind, she was following his father’s orders.

“Apparently, I was mistaken,” Kyril continued. “I believed that she was living in comfort away from my father’s notice. Thus, I saw no cause for concern. Now that I’ve seen her for myself, I know how she must have suffered.”

Kyril regretted his past inaction. He hadn’t received parental love since losing his mother, either. After her death, the emperor grew cold, closing his heart to everyone. Hoping to gain his father’s attention, Kyril studied how to become the post-possible emperor. At the same time, he’d undergone harsh training.

This had led to feelings of jealousy towards his sister. She'd escaped their father and was protected by Marfa's love, after all. Yet, by all appearances, she hadn't been treated like a princess. She must have endured far greater suffering than him.

"How could I have allowed the suffering of such a small child?" Kyril asked. "Starting now, I want to repent for my wrongdoing."

"You are most gracious, my prince," the high commander replied.

"As a tianshi, she deserves nothing less."

"I quite agree."

At this, the two shared a small laugh.



"**OH** my goodness." That sighed. She pressed a hand to her chest while riding on the dragon's back. "My heart's about to burst."

Ryuhō licked her cheeks, attempting to calm her down.

"Why so surprised?" the dragon asked.

"I mean, I opened my eyes to find a ridiculously handsome boy staring me right in the face. What girl wouldn't be surprised?"

"Ridiculously handsome?" the dragon repeated. "That boy is your brother, you know. He's the spitting image of his father—impudent face and all."

"Yeah, his face was nothing special!" Ryuhō growled in response.

During the previous two loops, That had never seen her brother. She'd been cut off from the outside world. After escaping, her father and brother were killed during the coup. As a result, she'd never seen either of their faces.

"Huh?" That asked. "That boy is the crown prince? Oh no, what should I do?! Am I going to be arrested? Murdered?!"

"Doubtful," the dragon replied. "He called you a tianshi, after all."

"A *what*?!"

"If he recognized you as the princess, you would have to be punished."

Therefore, the crown prince declared you to be a tianshi.”

“...So, in other words, I’m safe? He spared me?”

“Do your best to act like a proper tianshi,” the dragon advised with a throaty laugh.



**AFTER** returning to the storehouse, That rummaged through the wicker cabinet. She was searching for more books on etiquette. Continuing to study the first book would remain paramount as well, especially if she ran into her father or any other high-ranking nobles.

*Are there any etiquette books specifically related to the emperor or the dragon? she wondered. If I don’t find one right away, I’m a goner!*

She had learned the importance of etiquette after provoking the dragon’s wrath.

*If I make a mistake in front of the emperor, he’ll almost certainly execute me.*

As soon as that occurred to her, an old book inside the cabinet glowed faintly. Upon cracking open the cover, she had to suppress a surge of panic. Its pages were filled with text on etiquette unmentioned by the previous tome.

*Who even thought up all these complicated rules? she groaned inwardly. Either way, I’ve gotta cram them into my head as fast as possible!*

Expression dour, she glared at the book through her wooden tag. A moment later, Ryuho climbed on her lap, blocking her view of the text.







“This is so boring,” he complained.

“I know,” That replied, “but please be a little patient.”

“No, head pats *now*.”

“Once I finish reading, okay?”

“Just place the book on my back and give me head pats already.”

“Needy little kitten, much?”

Despite her teasing, Ryuho’s childish pestering put a smile on That’s face. Hardly anyone had ever relied on her before. Being needed by someone filled her with joy.

“Needy?” Ryuho repeated, his ears pinning back in displeasure. He headbutted That in the stomach.

“Ow!” she yelped.

“You’re the needy one, okay? That’s why I’m giving you so much attention.”

With a sigh of resignation, That placed her book on Ryuho’s back and stroked his fur while studying.

“And just so you know,” Ryuho added, “I wouldn’t let another princess in the whole world use my back as a bookrest!”

“Yes, of course,” That answered with a smile, rubbing his forehead.

Ryuho’s eyes narrowed blissfully. “Just making sure you understand.”

With that, he fell silent.



**THE** next day, Crown Prince Kyril searched the Big Dipper Garden with knights in tow. All the while, That and the old knight hid themselves within the trees. Of course, Ryuho was crouching at their feet.

Kyril had vowed to take That into his protective custody while Mion was still absent. During their search, his knights called out loudly to the girl.

“The palace celebrates the holy descent of the tianshi!”

“We’ve been ordered not to lay a hand on the tianshi!”

“The crown prince eagerly awaits your appearance, Tianshi!”

*...This has to be a trap, right?* That wondered, worries racing through her mind. After risking her life to visit the library, the dragon brought out three books for her. Unfortunately, she’d wound up leaving them in the Guidepost Garden. With her goal of acquiring knowledge unachieved, she would have to visit the library once more. Just as she’d been considering this, the prince and his knights had shown up.

The old knight was similarly perplexed, unable to guess Kyril’s intentions. If the emperor so much as laid eyes upon That, she would be executed. The old knight had thought the same held true for the prince. He’d done everything in his power to protect That and keep her away from the royal family.

*Have they come looking for me because of what happened yesterday?* That wondered, sweat trickling from her brow. *What should I do? Are they going to punish me?*

That hadn’t told the knight or anyone else about yesterday’s visit to the library. Though rumors of the Golden Dragon had reached the Big Dipper Garden, they hadn’t mentioned a child or a cat. Consequently, she’d let her guard down.

Meanwhile, Kyril’s knights wandered around the garden and called out for That.

“Tianshi!”

“Where are you, Tianshi?”

“By *tianshi*, are they referring to you, Princess?” the old knight asked.

That averted her gaze, her face flushing. “I-I’m not sure...”

“It has to be you, right?” Ryuho interjected. “That’s what they were calling you yesterday.”

The old knight donned a serious expression. “Princess, you’re the only one in this garden who could be mistaken for a tianshi.”

*This is ridiculous,* That thought, covering her face with her hands. *I’m*

*definitely no tianshi!*

And yet, the knights continued shouting.

“Tianshi!”

“Where is the tianshi in the white, one-piece dress?”

“Please reveal yourself to us, Tianshi!”

Eventually, Kyril let out a soft sigh. “Where did my adorable little tianshi go?” he asked. “Please come out and see me. You have nothing to fear.”

“Dumbass!” Ryuho pouted, slapping That on the back with his tail. “She doesn't belong to *you*! Right, Tianshi?”

Trembling, That buried her face in her knees. *Stop it, you're embarrassing me!*

At long last, Marfa appeared, having heard the commotion.

“It's good to see you, Marfa,” Kyril said, regarding the woman with loving eyes. “I've missed you these past three years.”

Marfa had been Kyril's wet nurse before That's birth. She met the boy's gaze, her eyes sparkling with joy. “I've missed you too, my prince. However, as residents of this garden, we would cause too much trouble by visiting the palace.”

“I see. All this time, I thought you'd chosen my sister and abandoned me.”

“Heavens, no!” Marfa cried, her face paling.

Kyril laughed in relief.

*“Marfa was asked who she would rather serve—you or That,”* Mion once told him. *“In the end, she chose the girl.”*

Even so, Marfa was an unaffected woman who couldn't lie to save her life. Kyril knew her well enough to attest to this. At that moment, a burden of three years lifted from the prince's shoulders.

“More importantly, what business do you have here, Prince Kyril?” Marfa asked, wearing an expression of heartfelt concern. “If His Majesty learns you've visited this place, you won't escape his punishment. Please return to the palace at once.”

Marfa no longer wore the uniform of a lady in waiting, as she'd done while serving Kyril. Her clothes were threadbare, and based on her rough hands, she now performed the work of a palace lady. Clearly, her work conditions were much harsher now than three years ago.

Until recently, Kyril had envied his little sister, who'd taken Marfa from him. Yet after seeing her yesterday, countless doubts arose in his mind. Her circumstances seemed quite different from what Mion had described. According to Mion, That had a separate home in the Big Dipper Garden, where she lived a carefree life with Marfa. Thus, Kyril envied his little sister, who monopolized Marfa's love and didn't have to suffer a strict education.

However, That wore shabby clothes unbefitting royalty. The Big Dipper Garden had fallen into ruin, seeming abandoned. Worse, Kyril couldn't find anything resembling a separate home—only the inauspicious storehouse where another princess had been imprisoned long ago. Though he'd been told that Marfa was happy, she looked tired as well.

*I'm glad I came to look for myself,* Kyril thought. *Did Mion lie out of concern for me? No matter her reasons, this is far different from what I expected.*

"Prince Kyril has come to visit the *tianshi*," one of the knights explained.

These words disturbed Marfa. She didn't understand what they implied. "What do you mean by *the tianshi*?" she asked.

"A young girl lives here; does she not? We're referring to her."

"Does the emperor also wish to see her...?" Marfa said in a wisp of a voice.

Of course, she couldn't utter the words "to kill her." Nonetheless, she looked at Kyril pleadingly. She'd been the prince's wet nurse once. Later, she became That's wet nurse but never stopped loving him. She loved both of them as her own children. Though Kyril and That had never met, they were still siblings. The idea of helping Kyril take part in his sister's death broke Marfa's heart.

"Father isn't here right now," Kyril said with a calming smile. "And again, we're looking for the *tianshi*, not the princess. You understand why we came all this way and made the distinction, don't you? Mother also called her a *tianshi*, remember?"

Marfa's face broke out into a radiant smile. While she was still pregnant, the empress gave the princess a name. It had been the Yulan word for tianshi.

*How wonderful that he still remembers,* Marfa thought, pressing down on the corners of her eyes. *I thought I was the only one who recalled her true name. I now know something else for certain, too. Kyril is just as kind as when I served as his wet nurse.*

"In that case, do you have a plan, my prince?" Marfa asked.

Kyril nodded quietly. "I want to make arrangements before Father returns. The tianshi can read as well as an adult, correct? Even Father might come to value her as a vassal. The mourning period has finally ended, after all."

Marfa nodded in return. She suspected Mion of abusing the princess. Even if Marfa raised the princess in hiding, a bright future didn't await her. The incidents involving the cake and Ryuho came to mind. It seemed as though Mion was searching for reasons to have the princess executed. If these suspicions proved true, Kyril was the only one who could protect her.

"Princess, please come here," Marfa called out to That.

When That looked at Ryuho, he nodded and said, "Why not? You can trust Marfa, right?"

She then looked up at the old knight. "May I go over there, Mishter Knight?"

"Crown Prince Kyril is a kind young man," the knight answered. "He wouldn't do anything unreasonable."

"We're burning daylight here!" Ryuho grumbled. "And you've got nothing to worry about with me protecting you!" Following this pronouncement, he slapped That's back with his tail to give her courage. "Hop on my back already!"

He crouched down in front of That, causing her heart to flutter.

*You're the coolest of the cool, Ryuho!*

In reality, he would be powerless before the palace knights, but even so, the sentiment put a smile on That's face. What's more, running and hiding wouldn't change her fate. She'd learned that the hard way in her previous lives.

*All right, let's go!* she cheered herself on internally. *I have nothing to fear with*

*Ryuhō by my side! And with the prince as my ally, I'll have a much better chance of surviving.*

That took a deep breath and steeled herself. "Okay, take me there, Ryuhō!"

Once atop the Flame Tiger's back, he carried her to Marfa's side within the grove.

"Allow me to present the tianshi," Marfa said as an introduction.

That had no idea how to respond.

*If I don't deny it, I'll die of embarrassment! But the prince came to meet me because I'm supposedly a tianshi, right?*

Still unsure what to say, That hopped down from Ryuhō's back. She then looked up at the prince while fidgeting nervously.

Upon seeing his little sister, Kyril's legs almost gave out. He placed a hand over his mouth to prevent a delighted squeal from escaping his lips.

*She's cuter than I expected,* he thought.

His chest swelled with so much nostalgia and affection that he feared it might burst. "Tianshi..."

That single address overflowed with kindness. Once again, That found herself at a loss for words.

*What should I call him?* she wondered. *Your Highness? Or just Prince Kyril? If he doesn't like me, I'm doomed, right? Marfa, help a girl out and introduce him! I have no idea what to call the guy!*

"Tianshi," Marfa said, "This young man is Crown Prince Kyril—the young dragon of Jinlong."

That sighed in relief and looked at Kyril. *All right then, I'll greet him as the crown prince.*

Gingerly, she stepped forward, got down on her knees, and placed her hands on the ground. Finally, she tapped her forehead against the earth three times. Once finished, she stood up and performed this bow two more times. She'd just learned about this sign of obeisance—reserved solely for the emperor—while

reading last night.

“Blood of the imperial line, thou art a gemstone more precious than the Heavenly Lightning Bolt,” That recited. “Thou doth possess the scale of the Golden Dragon. May the blessings of Heaven be upon ye, Crown Prince Kyril— young dragon of Jinlong.{

*I read about this bow and address in a book from the wicker cabinet, she thought. No way it's wrong!*

Kyril stared down at That, utterly lost for words. *What is this?* he wondered. *How much does this small child—my sister, no less—fear me? Enough to perform the three kneels and nine bows?*

This bow was the most deferential sign of allegiance that one could show the royal family. However, it had caused discord with foreign emissaries, who viewed groveling as humiliating. Emperor Feilong had abolished the three kneels and nine bows to prevent petty conflicts. After all, everyone knew of the greatness of his might. He didn't need it proven through kowtowing.

“Crown Prince Kyril?” That called out to her brother.

Upon hearing these words, Kyril came back to his senses. “This ancient bow hasn't been used since my father took the throne.” Kyril looked close to tears as he addressed Marfa. “Even as a member of the royal family, I only know about this bow through its historical context. Why has the tianshi already been taught to perform it?”

Both That and Marfa were shocked into silence. “Honestly, I have no idea where she learned it,” Marfa finally spoke. “I'm none too knowledgeable about Jinlong's military and court etiquette. Back in the day, I even requested a specialist to teach you, Prince Kyril. Where could the princess have learned this...?”

*Seriously?! That shouted internally. No one bows like this anymore?! Or maybe it was too formal for the crown prince?*

Kyril squatted down in front of That, meeting her at eye level. “Tianshi, a heavenly being mustn't grovel before an earthly being.”

In response to Kyril's chastisement, the blood drained from That's face. /

*screwed up, she thought. Marfa's not going to be punished, too, right?*

"Forgive me, Crown Prince," she pleaded, her eyes brimming with tears. "Please don't scold Marfa."

For her part, Marfa smiled calmly.

"If you don't mind..." Kyril trailed off, his cheeks reddening.

"Yes?" That asked reflexively.

"If you don't mind, please call me Big Brother."

*Whoa, what?! Is that okay? Won't there be trouble if I'm outed as his little sister?*

That glanced up at Marfa. When the woman responded with a slight nod, That decided to stop overthinking things for now. In any case, she couldn't defy the crown prince to begin with.

"...Big Brudder?"

*Oh, c'mon, did I just slur again?! Curse this three-year-old tongue!*

"S-Sorry." That's cheeks flushed, the heat reaching the tips of her ears. Flustered, she tried to correct herself. "B-Big Brud... ther."

Kyril picked up That, his face splitting into a wide grin. "That's right! I'm your big, big brudder!"

*Are you kidding me?! He's okay with that?*

"Yes indeed!" Kyril cheered. "I'm the *big brudder* to this darling little tianshi!"

"Yuck!" Ryuho groused quietly, sickened to his core.

"Well then," Kyril continued. "Starting today, you'll be staying in my room, my darling little tianshi."

Panicked, That shot a glance at her wet nurse. "What about Marfa and Ryuho?"

"I'm sorry, Marfa, but I still haven't gotten Father's permission," Kyril said. "I'd like to invite you over soon, but for now..."

"Oh, yes, I more than understand," Marfa replied. "Please do as you wish,



Prince Kyril. I want nothing more than for you and the princess to be happy. If you run into any trouble, you may ask anything of me.”

“Thank you.”

“Together, the two of you will be able to melt His Majesty’s frozen heart,” Marfa said with a smile, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. “I truly believe that.”

Kyril looked down at That. “Don’t worry—I’ve prepared a bed for the cat as well.”

“Ryuho’s coming with us?” That asked.

“Indeed he is.”

“You couldn’t stop me even if you tried!” Ryuho shouted grumpily. He stepped on Kyril’s foot, looked up at him, and hissed. Following this tantrum, he turned his glare on That. “You’re riding on my back, Princess!”

That almost burst out laughing at Ryuho’s antics. “Will you let me down, Big Brudder?” she asked.

Kyril’s face fell. After finally getting the chance to hold his little sister, he didn’t want to let go of her so readily. “My room is a long way away,” he said. “You won’t be able to walk there, Tianshi.”

“It’s okay,” That assured him. “Ryuho will carry me there!”

“Yes, but...”

Kyril tightened his embrace around That and glared down at Ryuho. The Flame Tiger glared back up at him. The atmosphere was akin to a volcano on the verge of erupting.

*Why is this happening?* That wondered, trying to work out a solution in Kyril’s arms.

Suddenly, she remembered Ming Ming. Back in the bar, the young girl had been popular. Oftentimes, people fought over who got to hold her next. Somehow, Ming Ming always settled these arguments before anything bad happened.

*Take this! Ming Ming's signature move: Adorable pestering!*

That stared deeply into Kyril's eyes. In turn, his eyes narrowed as blissfully as any cat's.

"Big Brudder," That said, tilting her head in the most adorable fashion. "Can I please, please, please ride Ryuho?"

Her sheer cuteness nearly stopped Kyril's heart.

"I don't wanna go if I can't ride Ryuho," she added, tears forming in her eyes.

Immediately, Kyril's bottom lip trembled.

"Prince Kyril, this is the princess's first time meeting you," Marfa said. "Perhaps she's nervous."

Kyril nodded. "I'm sorry, Tianshi. I'll do whatever you wish." Having said this, he placed That on the ground. Nevertheless, he still ruffled her hair, seeming reluctant to part with her.

When That's eyes narrowed blissfully like a cat's, Ryuho slapped Kyril's hand with his tail. "Hey!" The Flame Tiger shouted. "Who said you could touch her?!"

"Ryuho, don't slap people," That chided him.

"Why?! You actually like this guy?! You want his stupid head pats?!"

"Huh? You're being weird, Ryuho."

"No, I'm not! And under the right circumstances, I could give you head pats, too!"

That giggled. Apparently, head pats were a big deal to Ryuho.

"Are you not going to let the tianshi ride you, Ryuho?" Kyril asked. "In that case..."

As Kyril bent down to pick up That again, Ryuho bared his fangs and growled menacingly. "Keep your grubby hands off her!"

Ryuho used his teeth to grab That by the collar. After snatching her away from Kyril, the Flame Tiger hid her behind his back. As Kyril opened his mouth to scold Ryuho for being too rough, That squealed in delight. Apparently, she was used to this sort of thing.

“Hurry up and get on my back!” Ryuho demanded.

“Okay,” That replied. With Ryuho crouching on the ground, she wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to his back. “Love you, Ryuho.”

Once sure of her grip, the Flame Tiger slowly got to his feet. Afterward, That stood up on his large and stable back. She might as well have been riding on a cloud. His fur was supremely fluffy, and he moved soundlessly. Having claimed That as his passenger, Ryuho huffed in triumph.

Seeing this soured Kyril’s mood somewhat. “Well then, let’s be on our way,” he called out to his knights.

With that, their group left the Big Dipper Garden.



**WHEN** Prince Kyril reentered the palace, the sight rendered everyone speechless. An orange cat—or perhaps a tiger—brazenly followed behind him. Moreover, a young girl with pink hair sat on the cat’s back. She wasn’t outfitted in the traditional Jinlongian robes. Rather, she wore a Yulan one-piece dress as a show of respect for her mother’s homeland.

Before long, the speechless courtiers regained their senses and panicked. Everyone knew the identity of the young girl. She was the princess who hadn’t received a name from the emperor.

If only Prince Kyril were present, the people would have bowed reverently. If only That were present, they would have apprehended her and taken her back to the garden. However, the two of them were walking together. What’s more, the prince’s personal guards were surrounding them. Unsure what else to do, the people ultimately knelt before Kyril, pretending not to have seen That.

“The tianshi has arrived at the palace,” Kyril announced. “She is a guest of mine. Please treat her with the utmost politeness.”

The people bobbed their heads up and down in a show of deference. Following this brief pronouncement, everyone would now recognize That as a tianshi.

*Kyril sure is amazing, she thought. If the crown prince says that one plus one*

*equals three, everyone has to believe him.*

“Look alive, miss divine messenger,” Ryuho called out, breaking That free of her stupefaction. “The Golden Dragon told you to act like a tianshi, remember?”

That’s heart leapt into her throat. Spinning around, she did her best to smile at the courtiers. In response, they placed their hands on their chests and gasped.

“She truly is a tianshi!” someone cried out.

*Oh, c’mon, That thought. Quit sucking up to the prince!*

As the courtiers shouted their exaggerated praise, That nearly died of embarrassment. The smile plastered on her face began to twitch.

“For now, I’ll take you to my room,” Kyril said. “There’s no need to bother Mion since she’s on an extended break. I’ll inform her of your arrival later.”

Kyril began walking again, and Ryuho followed him with a haughty expression. Unsure what else to do, That waved goodbye to her audience. Once they were a short distance away, the knights and courtiers began to panic. Some even collapsed to their knees, their shaky legs no longer able to support them. That looked away from this scene, pretending not to have noticed.

Soon, they arrived at Kyril’s room in the North Star Sanctuary. Inside, pleasant aromas wafting from piping hot food steamers filled the air. There were also foreign fruits and beautiful confections unfamiliar to That. When her stomach growled, Kyril smiled sadly.

“I prepared this food for you, Tianshi,” he said. “Eat whatever you like.”

“Thank you,” That replied. “Um, can you bring Ryuho a chair too?”

Kyril struggled to come up with a response. He’d never heard of royalty sharing tables with cats.

“Ryuho is a special cat,” That added in a hurry. “He needs to be treated like a person.”

Kyril contemplated this for a moment. “Is he a Flame Tiger cub, perhaps?”

“So what if I am?!” Ryuho barked peevishly.

“He is,” That replied, translating for him.

“That wasn’t even close to my phrasing! But yeah, I’m a Flame Tiger.”

“Wait, really?!” That cried out, nearly falling over from shock. “You’re *not* a cat?”

As she recalled, the palace ladies had spoken about Ryuho possibly being a Flame Tiger—a mythical holy beast from a distant nation. That had interpreted their chatter as a joke and ignored them.

“What, is it so bad to be a tiger...?” Ryuho asked sullenly.

“If you’re a Flame Tiger, does that mean you’re going to get even bigger?” That asked, hugging him tightly. “That’s so cool!”

Ryuho’s face reddened. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

“I see,” Kyril said while preparing another chair for Ryuho. “If he’s a Nanranese holy beast, we need to treat him as an honored guest.”

“Hmph!” Ryuho huffed, climbing up on his chair.

That sat down next to Ryuho. Personally, she found his behavior quite charming.

Kyril then sat down next to That. To put her at ease, he took a large bite of a shoutao bao—a steamed bun in the shape of a peach—in a most unprincely fashion. “Incredible,” he said. “Would you like to try one as well?”

Nodding fervently, That reached out for a shoutao bao of her own. However, Ryuho began sniffing it from the side. Once finished, he gobbled down half the steamed bun in a single bite.

“Ryuho!” That shouted.

“It’s not poisoned,” he replied. “Have at it.”

His words stunned her. She hadn’t even considered the possibility of the food being poisoned.

“You shouldn’t risk your life for my sake,” she chided him.

“My nose can sniff out poison,” Ryuho countered. “Plus, I’m pretty resistant to it in the first place.”

That breathed out a sigh of relief. Even so, she didn't like Ryuho putting himself at risk for her. "Next time, just check by scent, okay?" she said. "Don't sacrifice yourself for me."

"Flame Tigers are special," he insisted. "Like I said, we're resistant to poison."

"Still, I'm worried about you."

At this, Ryuho turned his head away from That sulkily.

"Was Ryuho testing for poison, by any chance?" Kyril asked.

With a gasp, That quickly bowed her head. "I'm sh-shorry, Prinsh Kyril!"

*Is he going to scold me for being suspicious of royalty?*

"You're supposed to call me Big Brudder, remember?" Kyril responded with a smile. "And you have nothing to worry about. I'm not angry."

A pang of sadness shot through the prince. His little sister was too oversensitive and quick to apologize.

*This must be how she's lived up until now, he thought. But since she trusted Marfa and the knight, someone else must have caused this. It couldn't have been Mion, right...?*

Mion excelled as the chief lady in waiting. She was always fair and level-headed. Furthermore, she was sharp-witted and profoundly merciful. Since the empress's death, many people called for her to become the next empress. Kyril had no objection to this, as Mion had always been kind to him. However, Emperor Feilong refused to acknowledge any woman other than his deceased wife as a possible empress.

Kyril shook his head, dispelling these doubts. *I can't imagine Mion raising her hand against such an adorable child, he thought. It must have been another palace lady. I'll have to look into the matter later. But first and foremost, I need That to trust me.*

"So, you can understand Ryuho?" Kyril asked his sister, doing his best not to frighten her.

That glanced at Ryuho, who looked away sulkily once again. Only she could hear his voice, and he'd asked her to keep this a secret.

“I can more or less understand what he’s feeling...” she hedged. “Do you think that’s weird?”

Kyril nodded and smiled. “No, at all. I think it’s wonderful. You truly are a tianshi.”

That breathed a sigh of relief. Mion had always invalidated her accomplishments. “What took you so long?” she would scoff whenever That learned a new skill. “Anyone your age could do the same thing.” Even when That did accomplish something impressive, Mion would accuse her of being strange or demonic. As a result, she could hardly believe Kyril’s straightforward praise. At the same time, it filled her with joy.

“That aside, I’ll give you half of my shoutao bao, seeing as Ryuho gobbled up most of yours.” Kyril cut his own steamed bun in half and gave the larger portion to That. “Eat it while it’s hot.”

That nodded and took a bite of the shoutao bao. “Wow, so good!”

“That’s wonderful to hear,” Kyril answered with a smile.

Ryuho’s ears twitched sullenly.

Once everyone had eaten their fill, Kyril offered to let That and Ryuho take a bath. Ryuho refused to do so, his menacing hisses keeping the palace ladies at bay. On the other hand, That happily followed one of them to the bath. Until now, she’d never been able to soak in a warm tub. Preparing hot water in the storehouse had been difficult. She’d only been able to wash her hair and wipe down her body with a cloth.

“Which perfume would you like to use?” Kyril’s personal handmaid asked, opening up bottles and allowing That to sample their scents. “Please choose whichever fragrance appeals to you the most.”

“...This one,” That mumbled, pointing to one of the bottles. Its scent was reminiscent of her teacher-knight.

“Oh,” the handmaid replied with a smile, looking surprised. “This is the Guidepost Tree perfume.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Not at all. Prince Kyril likes this fragrance as well. I was just taken aback by the coincidence.”

“Big Brudder likes this perfume too?”

“Yes indeed. In fact, the emperor had this fragrance created for his wife.”

That shifted awkwardly. *I should probably choose another one, right?*

“Um, now that I think about it...” she trailed off.

“My apologies,” the handmaid said, hastily bowing her head. “I shouldn’t have brought the matter up. Prince Kyril has ordered everything to be done to your liking. Please pretend you didn’t hear anything.”

For now, That changed the subject. If a similar opportunity ever arose again, she would choose a different fragrance next time.

“Do we have anything else in common?” she asked.

“Of course,” the handmaid replied. “You look very much like the prince when he was a little boy. Your wavy hair is particularly similar.”

“Oh, I see.”

That felt an odd tickling sensation in the depths of her heart. She’d just met her older brother and didn’t think they looked alike. They didn’t even share the same hair and eye colors. Strangely, however, others had commented on their resemblance.

*We really are siblings...*

That had given up on ever forming familial bonds. After fleeing from the palace during her first loop, she hadn’t felt sorrow upon learning of her father and brother’s brutal murders. Conversely, she’d felt relieved. Later, she’d learned how family and friends ought to treat each other while living in the bar with Ming Ming. As a result, That began to fear herself. *What kind of monster feels relief at her family’s demise?* she’d wondered. *Do I even have the right to want a family?*

And yet, when she’d actually met her brother, he’d kindly offered his hand to her.



That sank into the perfumed water of the bathtub and washed her face. The warm water soaked into her skin and permeated her heart. For some strange reason, tears spilled from her eyes.

“Tianshi?” the handmaid asked.

“It’s nothing,” That replied.

“...Let’s wash your hair then, shall we?”

“Okay.”

“I’ll also moisturize your skin.”

“Okay.”

“Once you’re all clean and beautiful, we’ll show you off to His Highness. How does that sound?”

“...Okay.”

While That attempted to hide her tears, the handmaid’s chest ached. The girl had a thin body, dry skin, damaged hair, and brittle nails. Even at a glance, one could tell she hadn’t been cared for properly. Because she resembled Prince Kyril, the differences in their lifestyles were even more evident. Thus, the handmaid washed That’s hair with the utmost care. While doing so, she noticed a thin, golden scale behind the girl’s ear, causing her to gasp. It was the Inverted Scale which proved one’s right of succession.

*How did she receive the Inverted Scale at this age? the handmaid wondered. Without a doubt, she was born to be a princess. In spite of that, she’s suffered so much...*

The handmaid washed the girl’s body with equal care, giving her all the love she deserved.

After the bath, the handmaid led a squeaky clean That into a closet room, where Ryuho was already waiting for her. Lavish clothes unfamiliar to her lined the walls. There were traditional Jinlongian, Nanranese, and even Yulan dresses. Only a crown prince—or someone even more powerful—could have prepared this array of garments for her.

“Wow!” That cried.

Still in her underwear, she raced to the lavish clothes, her eyes sparkling.

“Prince Kyril had everything here arranged for you,” the handmaid explained. “Due to the lack of time, all the garments are pre-made, so not everything will be the right size.”

That shook her head fervently. Until now, none of her clothes had ever fit perfectly. However, she couldn’t blame Marfa for this. To make do with their small budget, That needed to wear slightly baggy clothes for long periods of time. Children grew quickly, after all.

That’s eyes sparkled as she admired a light blue dress with a high collar. Its color reminded her of Kyril’s eyes. Four navy blue twine buttons formed a line around the bodice. The skirt of this one-piece dress had been cut around the waist, forming six sharp pieces that resembled swords. A lacy, white underskirt was visible beneath these cuts. Finally, peonies were embroidered onto the dress in silver thread.

“So pretty!” she squealed.

None of these clothes were white. Beautiful and lavish, they were bedecked with frills and embroidery. That reached out to touch the light blue dress, but suddenly, her hand stopped. She feared getting the garment dirty.

“What’s wrong, Tianshi?” the handmaid asked.

“Well, um, I can’t wear such beautiful clothes,” That replied. “Do you have anything more normal?”

The handmaid smiled kindly. These clothes were nothing exceptional for a princess.

“As a tianshi, you deserve to wear a beautiful dress,” she said.

“But I’ll get them dirty,” That argued.

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Won’t they be hard to clean, though?”

The handmaid regarded the fidgeting girl with compassion. The sight of a three-year-old worrying about laundry caused her chest to ache.

“We mustn’t rob the head launderer of their job,” the handmaid teased.

As the woman grinned at her, That reached a timid hand towards the dress. “I want to wear this one.”

Her fingertips grazed the garment. She’d never touched anything like it before. In the past, she’d only worn linen and cotton, but this was high-quality silk. That alone caused her heart to leap.

“Well then, I’ll help you change,” the handmaid said, getting down to business. After helping That into the dress, she tied up the girl’s hair. Finally, she placed an ornament of artificial white peonies atop her head.

Ryuhō let out a bored sigh from the corner of the room. Once That had finished changing, she quickly toddled over to him.

“Ryuhō,” she said.

The Flame Tiger opened his eyes lazily, cleaning his face with a forepaw. Upon seeing That, however, his eyes began to widen.

“...Tianshi,” he muttered unthinkingly. Afterward, he slapped a paw over his mouth.

That giggled gleefully in response.

Ryuhō looked away. “Yeah, well, I guess you look like a tianshi in that dress.”

That squeezed him in her arms while he was still lying on the ground. “Thanks.”

“Hey, you’re gonna get fur on that dress. You don’t want to ruin something you like, right?”

“It’s fine! I love you even more!”

“Love you too,” Ryuhō answered, licking her cheek.





Watching the pair gambol about like kittens warmed the palace ladies' hearts.

A knock came at the door, and Kyril entered. He'd changed into Yulan-style pants. Since his mother's death, he'd only worn Jinlongian robes, but he'd changed to help That feel less alienated.

Upon seeing That in her new dress, Kyril's face broke into a dopey grin. "How adorable," he said with a sigh.

That quickly toddled over to him. "Thank you so much, Big Brudder."

Kyril scooped her up into his arms. This elicited an angry growl from Ryuho, which the prince ignored.

"How adorable," Kyril repeated while gazing at his little sister. "How incredibly adorable."

That had no idea how to respond. "Um..." she trailed off.

Kyril walked while still holding her. "I'll take you to your room now," he said.

Ryuho circled Kyril's feet, yowling up a storm and blocking the prince's path forward. "Let her down!" he shouted. "Let her down right now!"

"Calm down, Ryuho," Kyril chided. "You wouldn't want me to drop her, would you?"

Ryuho stopped yowling and reluctantly walked by Kyril's side. Indeed, attacking the prince while he held That would be unwise.

"Damn it!" Ryuho swore. "If you just put her down, this wouldn't even be an issue!"

Kyril glanced at Ryuho from the corner of his eye and laughed. Eventually, he brought That back to his own room. A small child's desk was next to his desk. The smaller one sported red lacquer and a mother-of-pearl inlay depicting a tiger. A brand-new notebook and brush sat atop the small desk, as well as the books she'd left in the garden a few days ago.

"Wow!" That cried, pointing to the tiger. "It's a big kitty cat, just like Ryuho!"

Ryuho put his paws on the desk and stretched to see for himself. "I'm way better looking than that guy," he huffed.

At the foot of the desk was a black box with a lustrous finish and a gold-sprinkled dragon lacquered on its side. Soft bedding had even been spread out on the inside.

“Is this for Ryuho?” That asked.

“He is your bodyguard, after all,” Kyril said with a nod. “I hope it’s to his liking.”

“I’m not grinning ’cause I’m happy!” Ryuho shouted. “I still have no idea if I like it!”

Despite these words, Ryuho seemed none too displeased. He hopped into the box and began kneading the bedding.

“Shank you sho much, Big Brudder,” That said, slurring her words of gratitude.

*I can’t believe how much he arranged for me in a single night, she thought. Even for a crown prince, this must have been difficult.*

That’s chest swelled with emotion. Protecting her in defiance of the emperor’s orders must have taken great resolve.

*And he’s even given Ryuho a warm welcome...*

Kyril had done everything in his power to prioritize That’s feelings. Tears welled in her eyes. Unsure how to relay her gratitude, she squeezed the prince’s chest with her small fingers.

“Shank you... for letting Ryuho come with me,” she said.

When That turned her teary eyes on Kyril, his heart leapt. Despite her childish manner of speech, he could sense her profound sincerity. As the crown prince, Kyril often received words of gratitude. Even so, he’d grown tired of exaggerated, flowery rhetoric. No matter how polished one’s words were, they were never truly grateful to him. They simply wanted to use his influence as the crown prince.

Kyril hadn’t heard such a joyful *thank you* since his mother’s death. After her passing, his father changed. He’d stopped laughing and begun speaking less. Likewise, he’d lost all interest in everything around him. In the end, he’d become an empty puppet who performed the duties of an emperor.

At first, Kyril had tried to restore his father's happiness. To please the emperor, he'd devoted himself to his studies and martial training. Additionally, he'd mastered tea brewing to relieve his father's fatigue. From time to time, he'd even perform jester routines for the emperor's amusement. Yet, no matter what Kyril did, his father never smiled at him. At first, the prince blamed this on his little sister, whose birth had killed their mother. He'd even been jealous of the girl, believing she lived a carefree, secluded life under Marfa's protection.

However, when he'd met That, her life had been vastly different from what he'd imagined. Not only was she small and bony, but her clothes and home had screamed privation. She was far more timid than any three-year-old ought to have been. Most heartbreakingly, she'd crammed her head with knowledge to avoid execution.

Kyril had felt ashamed of himself. He'd been the one living a carefree life of ignorance in the palace. Perhaps his father didn't love him, but all the same, he didn't have to fear anything in his daily life.

*Though I deserve her resentment, this girl is still capable of saying thank you,* he thought.

Kyril embraced That tightly, wrapping his arms around her head. "No, I'm sorry," he apologized. "I'm so sorry for not realizing anything until now."

That shook her head inside his arms, and, for some reason, she burst into tears. Panicked by her crying, Kyril began patting her head.

"Good girl," he cooed. "Sweet girl."

In response, the young girl's shoulders trembled. Flustered, Kyril continued to apologize.

At the same time, That continued shaking her head back and forth. "It's not your fault," she said, lifting her tear-stained face and smiling at him.

Seeing her put on such a brave face caused Kyril's chest to ache. To his surprise, she gently extended a finger towards the outer corner of one of his eyes.

"I'm happy, Big Brudder," she assured him. "So don't cry, okay?"



Her words caused him to gasp. Kyril hadn't cried since his mother's death. Did his current expression look as though he was on the verge of tears?

Kyril placed his hand over his little sister's. "So long as I have you with me, I won't cry."

"Promise?" she asked.

"Yes, I promise."

"How long is this going to last?!" Ryuho shouted. "Hurry up and put her down! I'm bored out of my mind here!"

The Flame Tiger beat his tail against the ground, letting out a low, persistent whine.

"Ryuho's bored," That translated.

Following this statement, Kyril opened the back door to his room. Beyond the door was an external corridor, and beyond the corridor was a garden.

"This is my personal garden," Kyril said. "Feel free to play in it."

He set That down in the garden. Soon afterward, a handmaid brought a beautiful ball and handed it to her.

"You can use this to play with Ryuho," the handmaid said.

The ball had been decorated with glittering embroidery. "S-Sorry," Ryuho said, his eyes sparkling as he observed it. "But I have zero interest in playing catch."

Despite saying this, Ryuho's tail throbbed with anticipation.

"C'mon, let's play," That encouraged him.

"Well, if you insist... I'll tag along with you."

Kyril observed the pair fondly as they began to play, both squealing in delight.



**THAT** evening, Kyril brought That back to his bedroom, where he'd arranged beds for her and Ryuho. He'd considered providing That with her own room, but ultimately, he'd come to this decision. In essence, he was defying his father,

and thus, letting her out of his sight would be dangerous. After all, someone might try to harm her on the emperor's behalf.

That meekly climbed into her bed, satisfied with the brand-new, soft blankets. Ever the calculating sort, Ryuho climbed in with her.

Kyril's face contorted with irritation. "You have your own bed, Ryuho!" he scolded the Flame Tiger.

"We've always shared the same bed," That replied, squeezing Ryuho with her arms. "Can he please stay with me?"

Upon hearing her anxious tone, Kyril couldn't object. "I suppose it's fine..." he answered with a sigh.

Ryuho regarded Kyril with obvious mockery, his expression supremely smug. "Go suck a lemon, pretty boy!"

Though Ryuho's words remained a mystery, Kyril could tell when he was being mocked. "Well then, I'll join the two of you as well," he said.

"Say what?!" the Flame Tiger cried.

"You want to sleep next to Ryuho too?" That asked. "Good idea—he's the fluffiest and the warmest! We'll make space just for you, Big Brudder!"

"Wait, don't I get a say in this?!" Ryuho blurted out.

That felt giddy, as she hadn't shared a bed with another person in a long time. She'd only ever slept alongside Ming Ming. She'd been in charge of putting Ming Ming down for naps. Occasionally, they'd dozed off together. The kindhearted couple that owned the bar had never rebuked her for this.

"I see," Kyril said, That's innocent delight melting his heart. "In that case, I'll find out just how warm Ryuho is for myself."

In response, the Flame Tiger whined in discontent.

"All right, Ryuho, you sleep here," That said, directing him to the middle of the bed. As a result, Kyril and That were on either side of him.

"Um, what?" Kyril asked.

"Seriously?" Ryuho grumbled.

“Good night, Big Brudder,” That said.

Kyril snuffed out the lights in the room, extraordinarily dissatisfied. He’d been looking forward to finally sleeping alongside his sister but, instead, had a large tiger cub’s back pressing up against him.

*How did things turn out like this?* Kyril wondered. After breathing out a long sigh, he quietly closed his eyes.

That’s chest swelled with joy as she snuggled beneath the covers alongside her kind brother and best friend. Yet, for some reason, her knight-teacher crossed her mind. *Is he sleeping on the battlefield right now? she wondered. If he returns and I haven’t left a message beneath the Guidepost Tree, will he worry about me?*

Based on her memories from the previous loop, this campaign would become known as the Five Hundred Days War. It was Emperor Feilong’s first campaign since his wife’s death. Likewise, it would be his first difficult battle since inheriting the throne. As a result of this drawn-out campaign, he would eventually lose his unifying power.

*My knight-teacher isn’t hurt, is he?* That wondered. *He’s going to make it home okay, right?*

“When will the campaign end?” she murmured to herself.

How could she feel happy when everyone else was suffering?

“I hope everyone comes home soon,” she continued murmuring.

“Don’t worry,” Kyril replied. “His Majesty has never lost a battle.”

That nodded. When the battle ended, she would visit the Guidepost Tree and leave a letter. She wanted to share so much with her knight-teacher. In any case, the hectic day had worn her out. After rubbing her eyes, she nestled her face against Ryuho’s chest as she always did.

“You’ve got no reason to worry with me by your side,” Ryuho whispered, chuckling softly.

Grinning, That buried her face even deeper into his fur.



**LOOKING** up at Emperor Feilong dazzled Mion's eyes as if she were staring at the sun. On the other hand, the emperor regarded her impassively. Though his long, silver hair was tied up in the back, his bangs covered his left ear. He wore a white robe embroidered with a depiction of the Golden Dragon over his armor. In particular, his black gauntlets and shin guards were visible beneath the robe.

Feilong had set up camp in Tongfeng. This territory belonged to the Lang clan, of which Mion was a member. Unceasing conflict plagued Tongfeng, as it bordered Anda—the kingdom of fiends. For generations, Tongfeng's most powerful clans had wavered between allying themselves with Jinlong and Anda, seeking aid from whichever nation would most benefit them.

Upon hearing of Jinlong's stalemate with the enemy in Tongfeng, Mion took a short-term leave allowed to one in her position. Under the pretense of visiting the camp, she'd come to see the emperor. Even so, the lavish provisions she'd brought had raised the troops' morale. After greeting the emperor, she would leave before the next battle began.

*His Majesty always looks most beautiful when dressed for battle,* she thought.

Reluctant to leave, she poured her heart into a long-winded greeting. His mind seeming elsewhere, Feilong ignored Mion's exaggerated words, fiddling with the ragged cloth tied to his scabbard. It was the piece of cloth on which That had drawn her charm. When Feilong had gone into battle without this charm, the enemy had mounted a surprise assault on him. Perhaps this had been a coincidence. Or perhaps the charm was truly imbued with protective magic. Either way, Feilong had kept the scrap of cloth close to him since the surprise assault.

*Have I really come to rely upon a charm?* he wondered.

Feilong had thought himself ready to die. More precisely, he'd wished to be slain in battle as soon as possible. He had no attachment to a world without his wife. Despite this, he now wanted to race back to the palace and search for the creator of this charm right away.

*Ridiculous.*

Feilong removed his hand from the scrap of cloth, not wanting to

acknowledge his own change of heart. Once finished with her long greeting, Mion departed from his presence. After confirming that she'd left, Yuen Lang—the emperor's close associate—brought up the next matter of importance.

Purple-haired Yuen had been instrumental in establishing Feilong as emperor. His father, Tomi, was the current prime minister. Father and son had served Feilong since his childhood. On the surface, Yuen's cold, purple eyes were always serene. However, a strong will burned beneath his gaze, and he possessed the muscular build of a true soldier. He was Mion's cousin and the nephew of Feilong's mother—a woman named Ryoui. Together, Feilong and Yuen had survived a number of bloody battles. Feilong trusted Yuen deeply and appreciated his friend's refusal to mince words.

"The clan chief would like to offer one of his daughters to you," Yuen said.

"I have no need of one," Feilong replied.

This offer had come from the chief of a clan they'd just conquered.

Until recently, Jinlong emperors had gathered beautiful maidens from conquered lands, forcing them to live within the inner court—the Canopy of the Emperor. There, they'd served as both hostages and concubines. However, proper Jinlongian consorts also resided within the inner court, and only their children were recognized as royalty. Of course, the empress had always been selected from the Jinlongian consorts.

In keeping with tradition, Emperor Xiao—Feilong's father—had sired many children with the concubines and consorts. Feilong had been the youngest prince. As the only son of an unloved consort, he'd lived a life of shame within the inner court.

"But Your Majesty," Yuen said. "With the mourning period having ended, many people are calling for you to take a new empress."

"Phaenna will forever be my only wife," Feilong replied.

Before marrying Feilong and giving birth to That, Phaenna had been a princess from the ruined country of Yule. A foreign princess becoming a proper concubine and then an empress was unprecedented. However, Phaenna had been Feilong's wife since before his ascension, and thus, he'd forcibly installed

her as empress.

“I know,” Yuen said. “Yet even if you never take another empress, we need someone to manage the inner court. While the Canopy might not function as it once did, we can’t disregard its purpose in keeping hostages.”

“Can’t Mion continue to manage the Canopy?” Feilong asked. “She’s done splendidly so far.”

“The chief lady in waiting must be on equal terms with foreign royalty.”

“That hasn’t been a problem for the past three years.”

“Yes, but only because of the mourning period,” Yuen pointed out. “With that having ended, conflicts will arise as families vie for the seat of the empress. You established a precedent for a foreign princess becoming empress. Both foreign and domestic nobles will begin plotting ways to elevate their daughters.”

Feilong glared at Yuen, sensing the reproach in his words. Though the man had been grating on his nerves as of late, Feilong stifled a sigh. Unconsciously, he’d begun fiddling with the cloth again. This spiked his irritation as well, causing him to cluck his tongue.

“Also, having only two members of royalty puts us in a precarious position,” Yuen continued. “If something happened to Prince Kyril, the empire would collapse. Everyone harbors such fears.”

*Do I not also have a daughter?* Feilong thought.

Scowling, Feilong stopped himself from making this argument. He hadn’t even recognized *That* as his daughter, much less a princess.

“These concerns are exactly why I had a second child with Phaenna despite her weak constitution,” Feilong said. “Her blood is on all of your hands.”

“Respectfully, Your Majesty, I never told you to have another child with Empress Phaenna. You could have chosen another consort to sire another heir with. You’re the one who refused to—”

“Enough!” Feilong barked.

“I’m not telling you to love another woman,” Yuen said. “However, I would like you to name one as empress. That way, she can manage the inner court,

help with government affairs, and put the people's minds at ease."

"That's how my mother was placed in the inner court," Feilong replied. "She was renowned as the most intelligent woman in the country. My grandfather chose her as the next empress to assist my fool of a father. Alas, my father despised her for being so young and capable. You know full well what happened next, don't you? She was your aunt, after all."

Yuen fell silent.

Ryoui had been a famously intelligent woman. As a result, she'd caught the attention of Emperor Yulong, who'd been Feilong's grandfather and the emperor before last. Yulong had begun raising Ryoui as a daughter during her youth. Unfortunately, this wound up backfiring. Before Ryoui had even set foot in the inner court, Xiao had already married multiple crown princesses. Xiao hadn't appreciated Yulong choosing the future empress without his input. Her intelligence and youth had only made matters worse. After years of being treated like a child by his father, Xiao had grown discontent with Yulong.

Later, Xiao was in disbelief when Ryoui conceived a child directly after consummating their marriage. Thus, he hadn't recognized Feilong as his own son.

However, after overcoming the Naming Trial and receiving the Inverted Scale, Feilong was finally recognized as royalty. If one's body didn't accept the scale, they weren't of royal blood, regardless of whether they passed the trial. There was no better proof of one's royal lineage than the Naming Trial, and Feilong's body had accepted the scale.

Nevertheless, this had merely deepened Xiao's suspicions. He'd suspected Feilong of being Yulong's son, not his. Furthermore, Feilong's intelligence had become obvious around his coming-of-age ceremony at ten. Consequently, Xiao had begun to view him as a threat. Likewise, Yulong's refusal to cede the throne to his son had fanned the flames of Xiao's discontent even hotter. Fearing that Yulong might name Feilong his successor, Xiao and his crown princess murdered Yulong in the Big Dipper Garden. Publicly, this had been treated as suicide, and Crown Prince Xiao had ascended to the throne of emperor.

Ultimately, Ryoui's status as crown princess was revoked. Worse, she'd been

forced to commit suicide through fidelity as Yulong's mistress. Fearing for his life, Feilong had given up his rights to succession. As a show of allegiance, he'd even pledged to become his own father's vassal. He'd been unable to escape the inner court due to his Inverted Scale and so had done his best to lead a quiet life.

Later, Feilong had married Phaenna, and his older brother—the crown prince at the time—had tried to make her a member of his harem. Enraged, Feilong had decided to usurp the throne.

Yuen recalled Phaenna. He could understand why the previous crown prince had wished to claim her—a married woman—through his authority. She'd been incredibly beautiful and vivacious. Though she'd been his close friend's wife, even Yuen's heart had burned with a faint flame of desire for her.

Following her death, Feilong had lost his reason to live. In the past, he would have decimated their current enemy, yet now they were locked in a stalemate. The emperor's lifelessness over the past three years had lowered the troops' morale.

*After great pains, we finally restored governance from that fool Xiao, Yuen thought. I don't wish to return to the past when only the capital flourished and only the royal family indulged in our nation's spoils. We cannot live while clinging to the past, so I must be harsh when speaking to His Majesty. If I can't make him understand my point of view, then I must brace myself for regicide. Sadly, I can't entrust the future of our empire to a dragon who's as good as dead.*

"...What happened to Aunt Ryoui grieves me as well," Yuen said. "However, Mion is well aware of the past and her own place."

"Why bring up Mion now?" Feilong asked.

"Apart from what I just said, she is the woman most capable of supporting you. Prince Kyril is quite fond of her as well. Even so, the final decision is yours, Your Majesty."

Feilong heaved a deep sigh. Mion did have a good reputation. During Phaenna's lifetime, she'd supported the empress as the chief lady in waiting while remaining single. Even after Phaenna's death, she'd continued protecting



the inner court. If Feilong were to choose someone, he could think of no one better than Mion. She was also thirty years old. If she wanted to have children, she would need to start now.

*I wouldn't be dissatisfied with Mion, Feilong thought. But at the same time, I don't love her.*

As he considered this, a messenger raced up to him. "I bear a letter from Crown Prince Kyril, Your Majesty."

Feilong opened the letter and perused its contents. "A tianshi and a Flame Tiger were seen riding the Golden Dragon above the palace?" he blurted out.

Unconsciously, he gripped the scrap of cloth fastened to his scabbard.

Yuen furrowed his brow. "Could it have been a hallucination?"

"You think Kyril is that dense?" Feilong responded. "The prime minister's seal is here as well."

Yuen fell silent.

"A tianshi..." Feilong mumbled. "Could it be true?"

Phaenna had given their unborn daughter a name synonymous with *tianshi*. However, Feilong had never spoken this name aloud. In his mind, the monster who'd killed his wife wasn't worthy of it after all. As he considered this, Yuen's words still sent stabs of pain through his chest.

*If I'd conceived a child with another woman, Phaenna would still be alive, Feilong thought. Angelina never would have been born. Almost certainly, she's the one who gave me this scrap of cloth.*

He still hadn't released his grip on the scrap of cloth with the Tianshi's Protective Seal. Upon becoming aware of his own actions, he sprang to his feet.

*I can't continue to ignore what's in front of me. Even so, there's something I must do beforehand. Without defeating our enemies, I cannot return home.*

"The Golden Dragon is an auspicious omen," Feilong declared. "With the tianshi's divine protection over us, we shall end this battle. Let us sally forth!"

The hem of Feilong's robe whipped through the air. Upon catching a glimpse

of the emperor's former splendor, Yuen gasped.

*Was the dragon merely sleeping?* he wondered.

Yuen bowed his head deeply. He couldn't bring himself to believe this all at once, but at the same time, he couldn't abandon hope either.

## Chapter 6: The Nameless Princess and the Courtiers

**WHILE** sitting in Kyril's lap, That found herself at a loss for words. Starting today, she would begin studying with her brother, and their teacher was—

*My unrequited love from the second loop! The guy working with the fiends!*  
She looked away from him, her shoulders slumping heavily.

"Tianshi, this is Junshi Lang—my teacher and right-hand man," Kyril said. "He's the grandson of the prime minister and our cousin."

*Oof, he even used a fake name back then...*

That's eyes grew distant. When she met Junshi in the second loop, he'd introduced himself as Haoran. In all likelihood, he'd approached her with ulterior motives from the beginning.

Junshi Lang was sixteen years old. His kind, drooping eyes, and silky hair were both purple. He spoke gently, and his middle part gave the impression of a highly principled young man.

*At a glance, I wouldn't suspect him of being connected to the fiends in a million years. Guess you can't judge a book by its cover...*

During the first loop, That learned the identity of the coup's mastermind. Yuen Lang—the prime minister's son and the emperor's right-hand man. Though the Lang family helped establish Feilong as emperor, their clan later collaborated with Anda to claim Jinlong for themselves. Afterward, Yuen became emperor of Jinlong. As the prime minister's niece, Mion had become the Archfiend's second queen.

During the second loop, Junshi pretended to be a low-ranking bureaucrat while delivering goods to That's storehouse. When he occasionally peeked inside, he'd noticed That reading the newspapers discarded by the palace ladies. Thus, he'd lent her a helping hand, tutoring That in various subjects and secretly offering her books.

Haoran had been the first older man to treat her with such kindness. After a life of abuse in the garden, she came to rely on him far too easily. Motivated by her one-sided feelings and faith in Haoran, she'd told him about the coup. Sadly, he'd been one of its supporters. Even so, That had still professed her love for him and begged him to stop the coup. He'd refused, inviting That to join the rebellion instead. Of course, she'd refused his offer, and in the end, a fiend witnessed their quarrel and killed her.

In the present, That kept her head down and said nothing. *Come to think of it, he probably treated me so kindly because Mion ordered him to keep an eye on me*, she thought. *Still, the Lang clan holds far too much power in the empire.*

"Tianshi?" Junshi asked, looking at her curiously.

As That jerked her head away, her cheeks flushed somewhat. *I hate to admit it, but that gorgeous face of his... He's just my type! Still, I can't fall for him again! I need to be on my guard.*

Ryuhō regarded That curiously, causing her to squirm uncomfortably.

"Apparently, the tianshi is shy," Kyril said. "Do you mind going ahead with the lesson, Junshi?"

"You don't mind studying like this?" Junshi asked, his expression doubtful.

He was likely referring to That sitting on Kyril's lap.

"...If I'm in the way, I can go outside," That offered.

*Oh, c'mon, did I just slur again?!*

Her cheeks burned. Junshi might have rejected her, but she'd been in love with him once. She didn't want to embarrass herself in front of him.

"N-No," Junshi stammered. "I just thought you might find this lesson boring, Tianshi."

For some reason, Junshi's face also turned bright red, and he averted his gaze. Kyril's face contorted with displeasure, and Ryuhō beat his tail against the ground.

"What's with this guy?" The Flame Tiger asked. "Is he a cradle robber?"

“Don’t be weird, Ryuho!” That chastised him.

Kyril looked down at his sister. “What did he say?”

“You’re a cradle robber too!” Ryuho continued shouting. “And you’ve got a sister complex on top of that!”

“Oh, um, he didn’t say anything,” That responded, waving her hands in a flustered show of denial. “It was jusht a mishundershtanding.” The more she panicked, the more she slurred her words.

Ryuho continued beating his tail against the ground, yowling his discontent at the top of his lungs.

“It doesn’t seem like that to me,” Kyril pointed out kindly. “Ryuho wants to tell us something, doesn’t he?”

“Let ’em know what I have to say!” Ryuho shouted. “They’re both cradle robbers; if they don’t stop leering at you, I’m gonna scratch their eyes out!”

Finally, That snapped. “They’re *not* leering at me, Ryuho!”

Junshi’s face turned bright red, and he coughed into his hand.

“I see,” Kyril said with a grin. “Ryuho’s jealous, is he?” He followed that up by embracing That tightly.

“Hey, let go of her!” Ryuho shouted, placing his forepaws on Kyril’s lap. “Put her down right now, or I’m gonna bite the hell out of you!”

That tilted her head, imitating Ming Ming’s adorable pestering. “I want to study at the desk you got me, Big Brudder.”

Kyril’s face broke into a dopey grin, and his heart melted. “As you wish.”

Once Kyril had let go of her, That sat in her own chair. Satisfied, Ryuho followed her and lay down at her feet. Because the chair was a little high, her feet dangled in the air. Looking up, Ryuho nudged her feet with his nose.

“Pet me,” he demanded.

“With my feet?” That asked.

“I don’t mind.”

After taking off her shoes, That stroked Ryuho's back with her feet. As the Flame Tiger's eyes slid shut in satisfaction, Junshi smiled at the heartwarming sight.

"Don't leer at her," Kyril warned sharply.

"No, um... It's just an adorable sight, don't you think?" Junshi responded. "A child and her cat playing together."

"Yes, the tianshi is incredibly cute."

Following a brief silence, Junshi began teaching. "We'll continue with your lesson from the other day, Prince Kyril. What would you like to study, Tianshi?"

Junshi expected her to want to draw pictures or, at the very most, learn to read. However, she hesitantly opened a book about the empire's history atop her desk.

"You can read this?" Junshi asked, his eyes widening.

That nodded. "I can't write very well, though..."

Overcome with disbelief, Junshi opened the book to a random page to confirm her reading abilities. Though she spoke in a lisping manner unique to children, That read it aloud. She'd even practiced beforehand, using the wooden tag.

"Incredible," Junshi said with heartfelt admiration.

When he'd first begun teaching Kyril, the prince's cleverness had surprised him. However, That had even surpassed her own older brother.

Kyril puffed out his chest as if this were his own accomplishment. "Didn't I say we could study together?"

"Lady Tianshi," Junshi said. "I will teach you everything you wish to know. Please absorb all the knowledge I have to offer."

He was overcome with excitement as if he'd found a golden egg. True to his words, he wished to offer this young girl all the knowledge at his disposal.

*Depending on how she's raised, she could become even more capable than Ryoui—His Majesty's mother, Junshi thought. I have to tell Grandfather about*

*this.*

Prime Minister Tomi was Junshi's grandfather. Previously, he'd ordered Junshi to keep an eye on the tianshi. Tomi didn't wish to interfere with the inner court, and thus, he'd decided to supervise this matter carefully. This was a family matter, regardless of whether it concerned royalty. Having it resolved internally would be preferable. Tomi wished for this not as the prime minister but as Feilong's uncle.

Junshi felt the same way. Getting involved in sibling or parent-child disputes wasn't his job. Yet now that he had actually met the tianshi, a wave of regret washed over him. Allowing her to waste away in the Big Dipper Garden would be madness. Likewise, punishing her would be the height of folly.

That shrunk back from Junshi's enthusiasm. *He was like this in my past life, too*, she thought.

Specifically, he'd been passionate about teaching in the previous loop as well. Whenever That had learned a new skill, he'd lavish her with praise and head pats. *I could learn to do anything if it meant earning those head pats*, she'd thought. When they were together, happiness and the sense of being cherished overwhelmed her. Regardless of her painful circumstances, simply receiving Junshi's praise made her euphoric.

In the present, That answered the problem Junshi gave her.

"Correct," he said with a smile. "Well done, Tianshi."

He patted her head as if it were the most normal thing in the world. It must have been a habit of his.

Unable to help herself, That grinned, her chest swelling with nostalgia and fulfillment. *In the previous loop, I tried my absolute hardest to earn this sort of praise, didn't I?* she thought. Yet strangely, her heart no longer trembled as it had back then.

"What, you like that sorta thing?" Ryuho grumbled.

"Don't touch the tianshi so casually," Kyril chastised Junshi.

"Head pats make me happy," That spoke up for herself.

Kyril pursed his lips. “In that case, I’ll be the one to pat your head.”

That giggled at his childishness.

Ryuhō rolled over beneath That, his soft fur tickling her feet. “Dumbasses,” he grouched.

*Before, Junshi was the only one who patted my head, That thought. But things are different now.*

She rubbed Ryuhō’s belly hard enough to muss his fur, her heart bursting with joy. Positively delighted, the Flame Tiger nipped at her feet. A childish smile danced across Kyril’s face as he watched them play around and squeal merrily.

*No matter what Grandfather or His Majesty think, Prince Kyril and the tianshi should be together, Junshi thought. At that moment, a small spark of resolve ignited within him. I’ll help make that happen.*

As Kyril’s cousin, Junshi knew the prince was starved of familial love. He’d kept watch over Kyril since the prince was a young boy, after all.



**FROM** then on, That’s schedule grew hectic.

Today, Junshi decided to show her around the Purple Forbidden Palace. After all, Prince Kyril had ordered everyone to “treat the tianshi as a guest.” However, Junshi had ulterior motives. He wanted as many people as possible to learn about the tianshi. She was an adorable, heartrendingly sweet girl. Even if she weren’t a princess or a tianshi, she would still draw sympathy. If everyone grew to love the tianshi, Feilong would have difficulty executing her. Based on the progress reports of the current battle, the emperor wouldn’t return for some time. Junshi would never have a better chance to put this plan into motion.

Unaware of Junshi’s motives, That followed him on Ryuhō’s back. A young girl riding on the back of an orange tiger drew quite a few stares. She wore a pretty dress that Kyril had prepared for her. While the dress had a short skirt for better mobility, he’d also provided her with frilly trousers. Both garments allowed her to ride Ryuhō with much greater ease. Furthermore, the palace ladies embellished the outfit to the best of their abilities. All told, That was adorable enough to cause cardiac arrest.



Seeing Junshi accompanying That filled the courtiers with relief. With the prince's close associate by her side, they could relax.

The trio proceeded northwards from the North Star Sanctuary, eventually arriving at a square pond. A nine-story pagoda rose from the center of the body of water. It was the Celestial Axe Tower. Today, Kyril was working inside one of its offices. Unlike when That had viewed the tower from the Golden Dragon's back, she now looked up at it. The sight of the tallest tower in Jinlong took her breath away.

Inside, Ryuho toddled up the stairs with That on his back. Per Junshi's instructions, she was carrying a basket of confections. Soon, they arrived at an office on the highest floor. When Junshi opened the large door, they found Kyril, the prime minister, and several courtiers working inside. A skin-prickling, volatile atmosphere filled the room. Apparently, they were dealing with a serious matter.

However, Kyril broke into a smile as soon as he saw That. When he stood up from his chair, the atmosphere in the room stirred. Usually, Kyril wasn't very expressive. It surprised everyone to see the prince acting his age.

"Tianshi!" Kyril called out to his little sister. "What's wrong? Are you in trouble?"

That shook her head back and forth. "Nope. Just came to bring you sweets, Big Brudder."

When Kyril checked the clock, it had indeed passed break time. With the campaign dragging on, a number of complex problems had begun piling up. He'd been working with his whole body tensed, and break time had passed without his notice.

"Oh, is it that time already?" Kyril asked. "Let's take a break, everyone."

"Could you pass out the sweets to everyone, Tianshi?" Junshi prompted.

In response, That hopped off Ryuho's back and distributed the contents of her basket to everyone. The first confection went to Kyril, and the second to Prime Minister Tomi. Upon receiving his sweet from That, Tomi regarded the girl with a fond smile.

“Thank you so much, Tianshi,” he said. “I feel ten years younger.”

As soon as Tomi referred to her as *Tianshi*, the atmosphere in the office lightened. Such kind words from the prime minister humbled That.

“Y-You’re welcome,” she stammered. “Please live a long life, Mishter Prime Minishter.”

“So cute...” a courtier murmured.

“Stop leering at her!” Ryuho barked from his post next to That.

Naturally, the courtiers stiffened with fright when they heard his growling.

At the same time, That turned to Ryuho and placed her pointer finger over her lips. “Shush! Inside voices, Ryuho!” Then, to pacify him, she rubbed his forehead.

“Yay!” Ryuho cheered. “Bring on the head pats!”

In response to his pestering, That continued patting his head and mussing his fur. When the Flame Tiger rolled onto his back, she scratched his belly. As everyone watched, a cozy atmosphere enveloped the office.

While sitting in an office chair, Kyril patted his lap. “Once you’re done handing out the sweets, come over here.”

That bit her lip hesitantly. Because she had the mind of an adult, doing such childish things embarrassed her. At the same time, Kyril’s invitation filled her with glee; she’d been starved of familial affection in her previous lives. In the end, she decided to be honest with herself and climbed onto Kyril’s lap.

“Open wide,” Kyril said, holding out one of the sweets.

“I can eat it myself,” That huffed.

Regardless, she still opened her mouth, which elicited a snort from Ryuho.

“You truly are the most adorable tianshi,” Kyril murmured.

As the prince spoke these words, Tomi observed him serenely.

*Looks like we’re off to a good start,* Junshi thought with a satisfied smile.

Shortly after, break time ended.

“Let’s be on our way, Lady Tianshi,” Junshi called out to her.

“Okay,” That replied.

While she exited the office on Ryuho’s back, the courtiers called out to her.

“Please visit us again, Lady Tianshi!”

“Promise you will!”

“Come every day if you can!”

The courtiers waved goodbye to That, lamenting her departure. Before, everyone had practically trembled in fear due to the volatile atmosphere. Her appearance had indeed been a blessing.

“I’ll be back!” That called out in response, returning their waves. “Good luck, everyone.”

Once outside, Junshi turned to her and asked, “Is there anywhere else you’d like to go?”

“...The Big Dipper Garden,” she responded hesitantly.

Her timid tone and upturned eyes nearly caused Junshi to swoon. “Very well,” he agreed.

Perhaps she wanted to relax without the worry of scrutiny. In any case, Junshi led That and Ryuho to the garden entrance without delay.

“I’ll pick you up when the evening gong rings,” he said.

That nodded, grateful for his accommodating attitude. Upon returning to the garden, she decided to visit Marfa first. She and the old knight were waiting at the storehouse. They’d kept the place tidy in case of the princess’s return.

“Princess!” Marfa cried. “I’m so glad you’re well!”

That ran over to her wet nurse and hugged her. “Yep, everyone’s being so nice to me.”

“Of course they are,” Marfa said through sobs, returning That’s embrace. “And you’re wearing a Yulan dress. You look just like your mother in that outfit.”

The corners of the old knight's eyes brimmed with tears.

"Big Brudder is the nicest," That said.

Marfa nodded. "Yes, Prince Kyril is a very kind young man."

"Oh, and Junshi is helping me study," That told her.

"How wonderful. He's well known for his intelligence."

That's eyes suddenly lit up. "I have snacks, too!"

"I'm so glad to hear that." Marfa laughed.

She and the old knight were filled with relief to find the princess happy.

"But..." That trailed off, biting her trembling lip. "I'm lonely without you, Marfa. You too, Mishter Knight."

She devolved into sobs and began bawling into Marfa's chest. She had a warm bed, delicious food, and beautiful clothes. The palace ladies and handmaid servants were so kind to her. She even had Ryuho's constant love and protection. To desire anything more felt excessive. Nevertheless, her chest ached upon seeing Marfa.

"I'm lonely without you, too," Marfa said, tightening her embrace on That. "But the day will come when we can live together again—I promise."

"Uh-huh," That sniffled.

"And you can always come here to play, as you have today."

"Okay."

Marfa wiped the tears from That's eyes. Afterward, the girl ran over to the old knight, who picked her up beneath the arms and spun her around. This was one of her favorite games.

"Yay!" she squealed. "You're the only one who does this for me, Mishter Knight!"

The knight laughed. "Well then, what do you think of this?" he asked, tossing her into the air and catching her.

Ryuho watched That silently as she squealed and laughed with delight. An odd

mixture of gloominess and irritation roiled his chest.

*I could throw her into the air like the knight, he thought. I could even pat her head like Junshi and feed her like Kyril.*

The Flame Tiger cleaned himself with his tongue. He had beautiful fur and strong legs. If he continued growing, he would be the strongest creature in the world. He liked that about himself. However—

Ryuhō glanced at That. She looked happy when interacting with humans. It was a different sort of smile from when she mused his fur.

*I should be the only one she smiles for!*

After huffing through his nose, Ryuhō scratched behind his ear with a rear paw to calm himself down.



**AFTER** suddenly moving That from the garden into the sanctuary, Kyril had been the perfect host. He even gave her permission to walk around the palace freely until the emperor returned. Of course, different knights always accompanied her on shifts. Nowadays, the Big Dipper Garden was the only place where she didn't require an escort.

That was spending yet another day exploring the palace. She had no problems moving about as she rode on Ryuhō's back. Since she hadn't entered the palace in any of her previous loops, each and every new sight astounded her.

The palace was an enormous city in itself. The Big Dipper Garden occupied the northernmost part of the city. Southward, one could find the North Star Sanctuary. Even farther south were government facilities, including the Celestial Axe Tower at their center.

From there, a large, straight road and waterway extended to the palace gates. The eastern side was called the Left Enclosure. This section contained the Canopy, where foreign dignitaries resided. Similarly, the western side was called the Right Enclosure. This section contained the town where Jinlongian courtiers dwelt. Each had its own stores, hospitals, and schools. Sadly, the people living in each enclosure seemed to bear hostility towards one another.

That arrived in the Canopy, where international culture abounded. The air was abuzz with foreign accents, the unfamiliar sounds filling her with wonder. As the tianshi, she wasn't beholden to the same ties of obligation as courtiers. She wasn't treated as a princess and could spend her time however she pleased.

Today, a young knight with brown hair was escorting That. During her initial face-off with Mion at the start of the third loop, this knight had accompanied the chief lady in waiting. As such, That was wary of him at first, but the young knight turned out to be quite amiable. He stooped down to eye level when speaking to her and did his best to fulfill her requests. At one point, however, he'd tried to lift her from Ryuho's back. His rashness had resulted in growling and snapping from the Flame Tiger.

An energetic child about the same height as That ran in front of her. Upon seeing Ryuho, the child's eyes widened with surprise. The boy tumbled forward, skimmed his knee, and burst into tears. After approaching the boy, That used the water she was carrying to clean his wound.

"Pain, pain, go away, or Ryuho will eat you today!" That chanted.

She traced the Tianshi's Protective Seal in the air with her finger. Of course, she was careful not to touch the actual wound. After drawing the finishing circle around the seal, she pointed her finger at Ryuho, who pretended to gobble up the pain.

"Wow, I don't feel a thing!" the boy cried. "Thank you, Lady Tianshi! And you too, Mister Tiger!"

With that, the boy dashed off again.

The knight's jaw dropped. "That was incredible, Lady Tianshi. You possess healing magic?!"

That wasn't sure how to respond. She hadn't been aware of it herself.

"It was probably just a small scratch to begin with," she said.

"Actually, you do have healing powers," Ryuho confirmed. "My leg got better in no time, remember?"

That stared at him, dumbfounded. She leaned in and whispered into his ear, “Wasn’t that because you’re so strong?”

Her voice tickled Ryuho’s ear, causing him to scrunch up his face. “I’m strong, but that tiger trap had a darkness spell placed on it. That’s not something I could’ve healed from so easily.”

That remembered how she’d cared for Ryuho. Indeed, the wound on his trapped leg had been severe enough to discharge pus. However, she hadn’t been able to heal it entirely on her own. Not quite convinced, she looked down in contemplation, closing and opening her fist.

“You’re incredible, Lady Tianshi!” the knight shouted again.

As his eyes sparkled, That recoiled slightly.

After walking a short distance, the trio came upon a flower vendor in front of a manor. That stopped, wanting to take in this novel sight.

The vendor called out good-naturedly to a passing woman. “Hello there. Are you a new maidservant?”

The woman had somewhat darker skin than a Jinlongian person. She fidgeted, obviously flustered by the attention. “Yes, I just arrived here,” she replied in an accented voice, her smile stiff. “This is my first errand.”

The vendor held out a single flower. “Well then, let this represent the beginning of our friendship.”

“No, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Don’t worry—no one’s going to buy this flower anyway. In exchange, promise to keep doing business with me.”

“Thank you,” the maidservant replied, handing the flower vendor her payment. She used a slightly larger bill than one would usually give a peddler. The flower vendor handed back the incorrect change, his expression one of feigned ignorance. The empire’s vassal states each had their own paper notes. Either this maidservant was unaccustomed to Jinlongian money or couldn’t do basic arithmetic. Thus, she thanked the flower vendor cheerfully, not realizing he’d swindled her.

“You gave her the wrong change, Mishter,” That pointed out, unable to stop herself.

This habit had been ingrained in her when she’d worked at the bar during her first loop. To pettily harass humans, fiends often used large bills not suited for shops in the lower city. Consequently, That had become quite proficient at mental arithmetic.

The flower vendor’s eyes darted this way and that. He hadn’t expected a young girl to point out his deceit. Smiling vaguely, he bowed to the maidservant in an attempt to escape the situation. “W-Well then, until next time.”

“Is this the incorrect change?” the maidservant asked. “I was told that I would get back five bills.”

When she counted the bills, there were indeed five of them.

“Erm, well, um...” the flower vendor mumbled incoherently.

“You gave her the wrong change,” That pointed out again.

The vendor turned in her direction, the blood draining from his face. “What’s this about, young lady?” he asked, feigning boisterous laughter. “If you want to play shopkeeper, perhaps you should do that at home.”

As his actions grew increasingly suspicious, the maidservant regarded him with newfound doubt in her eyes.

“You gave her the wrong change,” That repeated a third time. “Bouquets cost five hundred long, and the lady paid five thousand long. She’s holding five one hundred long bills, but you should have given her four one thousand long bills and one five hundred long bill.”

After hearing That’s explanation, the maidservant studied the bills in her hand intently. All five had the same pattern.

Having heard the commotion, a group of guards arrived on the scene. Several people appeared from within the manor as well.

“What’s wrong?” one of the guards asked the maidservant.

“Well...” the woman responded, glancing at That. “According to this girl, my change is incorrect, but I’m not sure who’s right.”



When the woman had finished explaining the whole story, the guard nodded. "The girl is correct."

At first, the crowd regarded That with disbelief. Soon, however, everyone turned suspicious glances on the flower vendor.

"Did you try to trick me?" the maidservant asked, crestfallen.

The vendor hastened to explain himself. "No, of course, I didn't, but... no one ever pays for flowers with such large bills, you see? So, um, I gave back smaller change out of habit. Yes, out of habit. I'm so sorry, miss. Here's what I owe you!"

After shoving four one-thousand long bills into the woman's hands, the flower vendor dashed away from the crowd.

"Thank you," the maidservant said, inclining her head to That with a kind smile. "You're the tianshi everyone's talking about, right? Please allow me to give you a reward."

"No!" Ryuho shouted.

That turned toward the Flame Tiger. "What's wrong?"

"Just no!" he shouted again.

They were standing in front of a Nanranese manor. Ryuho didn't want anyone from his home country to fill her head with wild ideas. Not before he'd explained things himself, at least.

The maidservant looked down at Ryuho. "Does the Holy Flame Tiger not want you to come with me?"

"Um, I don't think so..." That hedged.

"Well then, I'll let both of you be on your way."

"You heard the woman!" Ryuho shouted before tossing That onto his back. "Let's go!"

"What's going on?" That asked.

Ryuho pretended not to hear her as he bounded away.

Afterward, rumors of That having saved a foreign maidservant spread

throughout the Canopy in the blink of an eye. Some Jinlongian people looked down on vassal citizens as barbarians. Thus, the flower vendor's actions were common in the Canopy. Many people gave back incorrect change as a way of swindling young foreigners from the countryside. Unfortunately, most foreigners didn't catch onto this deceit immediately. When the truth finally dawned on them, Jinlongian citizens would sneer at them and say, "It's your fault for being so easily duped. Consider it a lesson fee."

As vassal citizens and servants, the young foreigners couldn't complain. Instead, these instances fanned the flames of their discontent. Their mounting resentment wasn't merely directed at their deceivers, either. No, it had become directed at the empire itself.

Then, to everyone's surprise, a young girl rescued a foreign maidservant from a Jinlongian citizen. What's more, she was being hailed as a tianshi throughout the empire. Apparently, she'd even healed a child's wounds. Thus, rumors of her being a divine messenger circulated wider and wider.



**"HOW** could I let this happen...?!" Mion upbraided herself.

After returning to the inner court from the battlefield, Mion learned that Kyril had taken That into his custody. Moreover, she was being hailed as a tianshi, and positive rumors about her were circulating throughout the Canopy. First, she went to Prime Minister Tomi—her uncle—to confirm this information. Her nephew, Junshi, was there as well.

"Emperor Feilong will be furious when he learns of That being allowed in the North Star Sanctuary!" she cried.

"The girl's name isn't That," Tomi replied. "Prince Kyril has introduced her to the palace as *Tianshi*."

"Uncle Tomi!"

"Right now, you are the chief lady in waiting, not my niece."

*So, no family favors?* Mion thought.

"If she isn't a tianshi, then this is a family problem," Tomi said. "I won't

interfere politically.”

“You’re also Emperor Feilong’s uncle, aren’t you?!” Mion argued. “With both his parents dead, you’re like a father to him. In other words, we’re all family.”

“Do not speak such careless words. I am the prime minister and nothing more.”

Mion gritted her teeth. Did her uncle wish to avoid this troublesome matter?”

“...I see,” Mion said, not backing down. “Regardless, Prince Kyril is like a son to me. I’m worried about this having a negative impact on him.”

“Apparently, even the residents of the Canopy are proclaiming her as a tianshi,” Tomi replied.

“You expect me to believe the nonsense spouted by barbarians?”

“According to Junshi, she’s a very clever child. She can already recite the North Star Anthology from memory. If that’s true, she might be even more intelligent than Ryoui.”

The North Star Anthology was Jinlong’s oldest collection of poems. They always appeared on the bureaucrat’s exam.

In any case, mention of Ryoui caused Mion’s guts to seethe with rage. *I’m the one who’s most similar to Aunt Ryoui!* she thought furiously. *That could never even come close to her!*

Ryoui had been Feilong’s mother. Years after her death, she was still the pride of the Lang clan.

“Don’t compare That to Aunt Ryoui!” Mion shouted. “The filthy blood of a Yulan barbarian runs through her veins!”

*If the tianshi has filthy blood, so does Prince Kyril,* Junshi thought, glancing at Tomi. *Does Mion understand what she’s saying?*

In the face of her fury, Tomi remained silent, not paying Junshi’s concerned glance any mind. Some Jinlongian people deeply resented Feilong for elevating the princess of a conquered nation to empress. This animosity had even been directed at his mixed-heritage children. However, no one said this publicly for fear of blaspheming the emperor.

Junshi opposed this line of thinking. In his opinion, having the blood of two nations was valuable. Even so, he didn't argue with Mion. Continuing this conversation here wouldn't benefit the Lang clan. For now, it would be best to ignore Mion.

However, when Tomi didn't rebuke her blasphemous statement, Mion interpreted this as tacit approval.

*Good, she thought. If Uncle Tomi approves, I'll eliminate That. I've waited three long years for this. My whole life, I was raised to support His Majesty, and I never begrudged my role. I might have given up on becoming a consort for a time, but I still supported him all these years.*

For generations, Jinlongian emperors had kept several consorts alongside the empress. This system existed to settle inheritance disputes within the inner court. Due to her frail body, no one expected Phaenna to have many children. Thus, Mion had anticipated Feilong taking new wives. His stubborn refusal to do so ultimately caused the empress's death. However, with the mourning period having ended, perhaps Mion could finally convince him to take her as a consort. She'd never married while waiting for this opportunity, and next year, she would turn thirty.

*I can't wait any longer, she thought. If That is recognized as a princess, His Majesty will have one less reason to take a consort.*

"I would like to speak to Prince Kyril for his own good," Mion said. "Not as the chief lady in waiting but as a mother figure."

With this pronouncement, she hurried off to Kyril's room. Meanwhile, Junshi and Tomi exchanged glances.

"Mion is too passionate," Tomi said with a sigh. "Hopefully, this doesn't quash the tianshi's potential."



**AS** Kyril and That played fetch with Ryuho in the garden, the nearby handmaid servants and knights watched them with smiles. On the other hand, Mion regarded this intimate scene with a scowl.

*Why is no one rebuking them?!* she screamed internally. As the one in charge

of the inner court, her skin prickled with irritation. After taking a deep breath, she forced herself to don a kind smile. She then called out to Kyril in a soft, ingratiating voice.

In response to Mion's surprise attack, That stiffened reflexively, dropping the ball in her hands. *I need to stay sharp right now*, she thought. *Mion will find any excuse to criticize me. I can't show any weakness right now.*

Despite these self-reassurances, That still trembled. When Ryuho licked her fingertips, she gasped and squeezed his neck with her arms. Ryuho licked her up and down, attempting to put her at ease. His sandpaper tongue tickled pleasantly, and his softness helped calm her nerves. Thus, she buried her face in his fur.

"Prince Kyril," Mion greeted the boy.

"It's good to see you," Kyril responded. "How fares the battlefield?"

Mion's chest swelled with relief. He'd spoken to her with the same friendliness as usual.

"Don't worry," she said. "We have nothing to fear with His Majesty leading the army."

"Excellent."

"But from what I've heard, you took custody of a tianshi while I was gone, Prince Kyril."

"Indeed I did. She's my personal guest. Please treat her with the utmost kindness."

Hearing this direct order, Mion's expression darkened. She'd expected Kyril to be somewhat discomposed. If he'd consulted her about That's treatment, Mion could have sent the girl back to the garden under the guise of helping him. Yet, surprisingly, the prince hadn't even asked for Mion's opinion. All the same, she couldn't back down yet.

Mion pointed to That. "But Prince Kyril, the girl by your side is no tianshi."

As That went rigid, Kyril regarded Mion suspiciously.

"Because you'd never seen her before, perhaps you weren't aware," Mion

whispered her words of warning into Kyril's ear. "However, as the one in charge of the inner court, I must tell you something. This girl isn't a tianshi. She is the child known as That, who the emperor despises."

That hung her head and bit her lip. Mion's words cut like knives.

"I don't blame you for not knowing," the chief lady in waiting continued. "The fault isn't yours, my prince, and we still have time. Let's return that *thing* to her rightful place, and I won't breathe a word of this to His Majesty."

Mion's words disgusted Kyril. When looking into the cause of his sister's odd behavior, he'd heard eyewitness reports of Mion abusing the girl. At first, he couldn't believe it. However, based on Mion's current behavior, the stories seemed more and more likely.

Kyril held the woman's gaze. "This is the first time you've ever opposed my wishes," he noted.

This boy was the crown prince. If he declared that one plus one equaled three, everyone would have to follow suit. Mion herself had always affirmed this.

"I speak out of concern for you," she said. "If His Majesty learns of this, you might be punished as well. Provoking the emperor's wrath could put anyone's life in danger—even yours."

Mion feigned an expression of fearful sadness. Though she seemed worried for Kyril, she was actually threatening him. She strode over to That, bent down in front of the girl, and whispered into her ear. "How can you call yourself a tianshi without the slightest hint of embarrassment?" she asked. "It's almost admirable."

That froze in place. Mion had spoken quietly enough to prevent Kyril from overhearing, each word dripping with scorn.

Ryuhō's orange fur bristled like flames. "Stay back!" he barked.

"Oh my!" Mion shrieked. "So, this beast *was* a tiger all along? And you brought it into the palace while pretending it was a cat? Such terrifying deceit! Apologize to the prince at once!"

“Mion!” Kyril shouted, boiling over with irritation.

“This is for the girl’s own benefit, Prince Kyril.” Mion heaved a theatrical sigh of exasperation. “If she isn’t taught right from wrong, she’ll never learn. Of course, this pains my heart as well. If her wet nurse had trained her properly, this never would have happened, but, oh, well, we can’t correct the past.”

Dark thoughts roiled inside That’s mind. *Mion always speaks of things being for “my benefit,” and for the longest time, I believed her. Now I know the truth. Mion only does things for her own benefit.*

“Now then, girl, why don’t you state your true name and apologize to the prince?” Mion asked. She spoke as if reprimanding an ill-behaving child. “Here’s what you should say: ‘I’m not a tianshi, and my name is That. I’m very sorry for lying.’ Could you repeat those words for me?”

“That’s quite enough, Mion!” Kyril bellowed.

Ryuhō growled alongside him. “This is one nasty woman!”

That glared back at Mion while hugging Ryuhō. “Maybe I’m not a tianshi, but my name isn’t That either!”

Mion’s eyes widened. “What did you just say...?”

*When the Golden Dragon asked for my name, I decided to no longer think of myself as That. Kyril, Junshi, and none of the handmaid servants call me That either. My name is no longer That!*

“I’m not That!” the tianshi cried.

“Good children must learn to apologize!” Mion shouted back.

“As I said, that’s quite enough, Mion,” Kyril interrupted. “The idea of Father murdering the crown prince simply because I took in a guest is laughable. Even so, if I’ve committed some wrongdoing, I’ll accept Father’s punishment myself.”

In the face of this decisive proclamation, Mion nearly forgot to breathe. “I’m merely worried for you, my prince,” she said in a trembling voice. She then scrunched up her face as if on the verge of tears, attempting to appeal to his emotions.

“This is an order, Chief Lady in Waiting,” Kyril replied. “You will treat the

tianshi as my guest of honor.”

His regal bearing stunned both Mion and That.

*You’re the coolest guy ever, Big Brudder!* That squealed internally, looking up at him with sparkling eyes.

Huffing, Ryuho slapped her with his tail. “Hey, I’m just as suave!”

Mion lowered her head so Kyril wouldn’t see her biting her lip. When she slowly lifted her head again, her expression had regained its usual placidity. “... In that case, I will do as you have asked.”

With that, she turned elegantly and left the garden. The hem of her lustrous, red robe billowed in the wind. *Prince Kyril has never defied me so vehemently,* she thought. *And it’s all That’s fault! She’s going to rue the day she talked back to me.*

Somehow, Mion suppressed the rage seething in her gut.

Once she left, Kyril turned his penetrating gaze on That. “Tell me, Tianshi, is this how Mion usually treats you?”

That wasn’t sure how to respond. *Will he believe me if I tell the truth?* she wondered. *If I’m not careful, he might end up hating me.*

As Kyril watched his sister struggle to choose her words, he surmised the full scope of the situation. *She started trembling because Mion appeared,* Kyril thought. *Just as I feared, the results of my investigation turned out to be true.*

“You don’t have to answer,” he said, embracing her tightly. “Either way, I’ll always be your ally.”

Ryuho leaned his full weight against Kyril. “Hey, I’m still her number one ally, you hear?!”

That returned Kyril’s embrace and petted Ryuho on the back. “Thanks.”

Though her heart swelled with joy, it required all her strength to utter this single word.



**AN** orange tiger raced across the pitch-black nighttime street. He soon



entered the Canopy of the Emperor—the inner court on the eastern side of the palace. For convenience, this place was called the Canopy, or the inner court. However, no concubines currently resided within its walls.

In the past, hostages from Jinlong's vassal or neighboring states had resided within the inner court. From these hostages, the emperor selected beautiful princesses as his concubines. However, this practice had become a historical footnote. These days, the hostages lived comfortably, with the inner court providing them with schools and shops. Though some residents had once plotted the emperor's assassination, Feilong had struck back with even greater force. The families and followers of everyone associated with the conspirators were mercilessly executed.

No one else dared to risk an assassination attempt. So long as the hostages didn't defy Feilong, they could live pleasant lives. Furthermore, they could study the empire's culture and the latest scholarly breakthroughs. The most exemplary hostages were even selected as bureaucrats. Finally, when a person's hostage term ended, their knowledge would earn them high regard upon returning to their home country.

Nowadays, foreign nobles were sent to Jinlong as nominal hostages just to study in the empire. Jinlong itself took great pride in this arrangement. After all, it allowed them to gather the brightest foreigners within their borders and form relationships with them.

The orange tiger entered a certain manor in the southern section of the Canopy. A Nanranese princess lived here. As a Jinlongian vassal state, Nanran sent her as proof of their loyalty. Put simply, she was a hostage.

The princess's red hair was tied up in a high ponytail. "Oh, welcome home, Ryuho," she said with a smile.

As the orange tiger stretched to his full extent, he transformed into a red-haired boy. Based on his red eyes and golden earrings, he was obviously Ryuho. He had tanned skin, a healthy build, and a laid-back attitude. In his human form, Ryuho looked like a six-year-old rascal.

Ryuho could only become human on the nights of a new moon. The Nanranese royal family bore the name Ruohuo, and according to legend, their

oldest ancestor had been a Flame Tiger. On rare occasions, this trait would reoccur in subsequent generations. As a result, someone like Ryuho would be born. Children with strong Flame Tiger blood would assume feline forms beneath the sun. However, Ryuho's blood was so strong that he even turned into a tiger beneath the moon. He could only become human on the nights of a new moon when its light didn't reach the land.

While this was inconvenient, Flame Tigers were more durable than humans, possessing greater physical prowess. Among the Nanranese royal family, those with strong tiger blood received greater consideration as potential monarchs.

Flame Tigers could gradually learn to switch between their human and feline forms. Unfortunately, Ryuho still struggled with this. Even so, those with strong tiger blood had to decide whether to be permanently human or feline by adulthood. According to legend, those who chose to be tigers could never return to being humans. These legends were uncertain, however, as so few people had ever chosen to remain feline. Still, no stories existed of a person who'd chosen humanity to transform into a tiger ever again.

If a person chose to become a tiger permanently, their fur would turn as hard as steel. Additionally, they would live five times longer than any human. All the while, they would remain immune to illness and injury. Flame Tigers were said to be the strongest of the holy beasts—high mythical creatures that soared across the heavens and manipulated fire.

However, if a person chose to become human permanently, they would rule over Nanran as a representative of the Flame Tigers. Likewise, their strength and control of flame magic would exceed a human's but not a tiger's.

According to legend, Flame Tigers burned down forests to make way for the great, fertile land of Nanran. Ryuho admired these holy tigers of old. In fact, he'd considered becoming a permanent feline himself.

Ryuho addressed Princess Shua—his older sister. "I'm staying with Kyril right now."

This blunt statement elicited a laugh from Shua. "You mean *Crown Prince* Kyril, don't you?"

"That guy doesn't deserve to be called a prince. He abandoned his own little

sister.”

“Do my eyes deceive me?” Shua asked with mock disbelief. “Did my little brother hide in my luggage and sneak into the imperial capital? Should I send him back right now, perhaps?”

“Oh, c’mon! I came here to protect you!”

Shua smiled mischievously. “And yet you’re spending every waking moment with the princess.”

“Ergh,” Ryuho groaned, temporarily lost for words. “I mean... When I heard about you becoming a hostage, I promised to protect you, but you’re not in trouble. The Jinlongian princess *does* need my protection, though.”

“Yes, yes, I understand. The princess even came to the rescue of my maidservant. Take good care of her, Ryuho.”

Shua was Ryuho’s older sister by six years. When it had been decided to send her to Jinlong as a hostage, Ryuho hadn’t been able to sit still. He’d snuck into her luggage and come with her. Yet upon arriving, she’d become a hostage in name only. Her life had been perfectly comfortable.

Before long, Ryuho had grown tired of living in the Canopy. However, he’d gotten caught in a tiger trap while exploring the palace. Since then, he’d been living with the Jinlongian princess.

After initially finding Ryuho, Shua had considered sending him back to their country. Considering the strength of his tiger blood, however, what could she do to stop him? “One mustn’t try to control a Flame Tiger,” it was said in Nanran. Rather, they were allowed to live as they pleased. If the holy beasts caused any trouble, damage control fell upon the royal family, even at the cost of their own lives. As a result, Ryuho turned out spoiled and selfish.

Shua had considered this problem at length. *Hopefully, his experiences in the capital will help him mature*, she’d thought, deciding to keep him with her. She’d contacted Nanran and explained that she had custody of Ryuho.

*Perhaps his immaturity is why he can’t maintain a human form.*

As a child, Shua had transformed into a tiger several times, but she couldn’t

do so any longer. Even among their family, few could maintain a feline form like Ryuho.

On nights of a new moon, Ryuho always returned to Shua's manor. There, he practiced magic and swordsmanship as a human.

*I wish he would study a little too.*

Shua didn't voice this thought out loud. Ryuho was still six years old. She didn't want him to reject becoming human because he hated studying.

Once Ryuho had settled down, Shua handed him a cup of lassi. "Are you thirsty?" she asked.

"Sure am."

Ryuho gulped down the yogurt beverage. He was thankful for this treat, as the palace didn't serve Nanranese food.

"Shua," Ryuho said, eyeing his older sister. "Do you know how I could transform into a human at will?"

"You want to be human now? I thought you preferred being a tiger."

"Yeah, 'cause Flame Tigers are stronger and cooler!" At this, Ryuho began mumbling almost imperceptibly. "But I dunno—maybe being human is better."

"I see. First, you need to know *why* you want to become human."

"Seriously? Hmm... If I became human, I could hug the princess. I'm a prince, too, after all! I could beat up everyone who says weird stuff to her! Oh, but I wouldn't be able to lick her then, would I? Huh... Maybe being a tiger *is* better. If I'm going to protect her, I need to be strong."

"You want to hug the princess?" Shua asked.

"Yep! It's not fair that only Kyril gets to hug her. He's always looking down at me with that stupid face of his. Oh, and she likes being lifted high up in the air!"

"Think very, very carefully," Shua said with a smile. "If you want to become human, you have to wish for it with all your heart. At first, try to do this solely at night when the sun isn't affecting you."

"Got it! By the way, how did you permanently turn into a human, Sis?"

“My blood isn’t as strong as yours. I only turned into a tiger occasionally during the daytime.”

Ryuhō frowned. “Really?”

“I wouldn’t have been able to wear dresses as a tiger, you know? That sounded downright awful to me.”

“Oh, is that it?”

Honestly, Shua hadn’t wanted her first love to see her as a tiger. However, she kept this reason to herself.

“Have you told the princess about yourself?” she asked.

Ryuhō’s lips formed a tight line.

“Is that a no?” Shua pressed.

“I mean, she knows I’m a Flame Tiger and thinks I’m cool.”

“Well, isn’t that lovely?”

When Shua smiled at him, Ryuhō lost his temper. “No, it’s not! She loves me as a Flame Tiger, not a person!”

Ryuhō hung his head, which allowed Shua to pat his hair. *He’s the opposite of me*, she thought. *He doesn’t have confidence in his human self. At this rate, he’ll still have difficulty assuming a human form.*

“Should I write another letter?” Shua asked, placing a gold coin in Ryuhō’s hand. “I can tell them about you myself.”

Ryuhō shook his head at this proposal. Only the Nanranese royal family knew the secrets of the Flame Tigers. Even if legends of them survived in Jinlong, most people were skeptical about their existence. Moreover, no one in this country knew about the Nanranese royal family having Flame Tiger blood.

“It’s fine,” Ryuhō said. “I’ll tell her myself someday.”

“All right,” Shua agreed. “Well then, please deliver this letter to Prince Kyril. It relays my intent to purchase all your necessities.”

“Thanks.”

After accepting the letter, Ryuho dashed out onto the moonless, nighttime street. The North Star Palace—where That waited for him—was his new home.

## Chapter 7: The Nameless Princess and the Cruel Emperor

**AFTER** seizing victory in Tongfeng, Emperor Feilong Xin Lei returned to the capital. At first, everyone expected the subjugation of the enemy to take longer. However, following the appearance of the Golden Dragon and the tianshi in the palace, Feilong crushed the enemy with the force of surging waves. Thus, the army had staged its triumphant return much faster than initially expected. After receiving reports of the Golden Dragon, Feilong's feats in battle had been particularly remarkable. According to rumors circulating among the people, he'd received the divine protection of the dragon and the tianshi.

Once inside the palace, Feilong heard about the tianshi nonstop. Everyone spoke of her favorably. Perhaps the celebratory mood had loosened their lips. Prince Kyril had found the tianshi and taken her into his custody. Now, she walked around the palace, healing everyone regardless of social standing. According to some, thanks to her, no problems occurred during the emperor's absence.

Of course, no one spoke of these events to Feilong directly. Even so, the rumors were so prevalent that he still caught wind of them.

A celebratory banquet followed the return ceremony. During this feast, Feilong and Kyril spoke to each other for the first time in a long while.

"So, you've taken a tianshi into your custody?" Feilong asked.

These words surprised Kyril somewhat. Feilong had discussed governmental affairs with him following Phaenna's death but stopped showing interest in Kyril himself.

"I have," Kyril answered.

Remembering his little sister brought an unbidden smile to his lips. She was sleeping in his room right now. It was late at night, and considering how thoroughly the emperor had ostracized her, she couldn't attend the banquet.

Kyril's smile surprised Feilong. His mother's passing had robbed the boy of the natural smile on his lips. Immediately after Phaenna's death, the boy forced himself to smile, which grieved Feilong. Seeing such an expression on a face so similar to Phaenna's had been excruciating. Thus, he'd distanced himself from his own son. Yet now, Feilong had returned from the campaign to find Kyril's natural smile restored.

Feilong gripped the scrap of cloth attached to his sword. *Is this thanks to the tianshi as well?*

Kyril examined his father, trying to get a read on him.

"The tianshi is under the protection of the Golden Dragon and a Flame Tiger," he said. "I'd like to introduce her to you, Father."

Feilong glared at his son. "*You* wish to introduce her to *me*?"

The emperor scowled. He'd been the first to meet That, and she'd given him the scrap of cloth as a protective charm. *How can this boy be so impertinent when he met her second?* Feilong wondered. Irritation flared in his chest as if Kyril were robbing him of a treasured possession.

Immediately, Feilong realized the immaturity and irrationality of his feelings. Before leaving on the campaign, he'd intended to kill That upon returning, hadn't he? To feel robbed was absurd.

*Yes, the girl asked me to teach her magical script, but would she have done so if she knew I was her father?* Feilong wondered. *I doubt it. She must resent me for driving her into that storage shed.*

Kyril recoiled from his father, worried he'd made a grave error. Even so, he had to establish his sister in the North Star Sanctuary as a princess, no matter the cost.

"Father, I—"

"I understand," the emperor interrupted Kyril.

Silence fell between them.

*Is Father angry?* Kyril wondered, his eyes widening in surprise. Nevertheless, he decided not to pursue this conversation here.



Feilong wanted to end this dull celebration and visit the Big Dipper Garden. He wanted to leave a message beneath the Guidepost Tree, informing That of his safe return. However, if she'd taken up residence in the sanctuary, would she even return to the tree? Would it be possible to continue teaching her?

Feilong's chest tightened painfully.

*How strange, he thought. Before leaving on the campaign, I planned to cut her down if I ever saw her again. Yet now, I want to continue teaching her? Have I gone mad?*

The emperor had begun to lose sight of himself.



**THAT** and Ryuho arrived before the Guidepost Tree.

"What are we doing here?" Ryuho asked.

"Well, before we met, I used to exchange letters with someone here," That answered. "I've never spoken with him face-to-face, but he taught me magical script. He was on the military campaign that just ended, so I thought he might come back soon."

In the previous loop, this campaign had been called the Five Hundred Days War. Apparently, this harsh and protracted campaign had weakened the Jinlong Empire. In this loop, however, Feilong had subjugated the enemy in less than one hundred days.

*Has history changed?* That wondered, faint hope blossoming in her chest. *Will it continue to change from here on out? And if the imperial army seized victory, does that mean my knight-teacher returned home safely?*

That had carefully composed a letter on a piece of stationery given to her by Kyril. She placed the letter atop one of the bean-shaped stones beneath the tree.

"Is that a love letter?" Ryuho grumbled.

"Not at all," That replied. "I just wrote something along the lines of, 'Did you make it home okay? I'm doing well myself.' Nothing mushy."

"Did you write anything about being a tianshi?"

“Of course not!”

“Still, he might come to visit you.”

“If he’s accused of teaching me magical script while I lived in the garden, he might be executed,” That said. “This letter expresses my thanks and tells him I don’t need his lessons anymore.”

To be honest, That wanted to meet him in person and give him a proper thank you. As she hung her head, the toes of two black boots entered her line of sight. Gasping, she looked up again. At the same time, Ryuho’s fur bristled, his tail puffing up like flames.

“This guy’s bad news!” the Flame Tiger barked. “I didn’t even sense him coming!”

That observed the newcomer intently. He radiated an air of composure. His long, silver hair fluttered in the night breeze, and his bangs covered only the left side of his face. He had thin eyebrows, a sharp chin, and a straight nose. Finally, his almond eyes sparkled coolly as if carved from glaciers. Unbeknownst to That, this was Emperor Feilong of Jinlong.

A depiction of the Golden Dragon had been embroidered onto his white robes. A black sword hung from his waist, and the scrap of cloth with That’s charm was fastened to the scabbard. His hand rested on the sword’s handle, and he looked prepared to draw the blade at any moment.





“Is that you, Mishter Knight?” That asked.

The man didn’t answer her question.

“Are you the one who taught me magical script?” she pressed.

At this, the man nodded.

“Thank goodness!” That cried. “You’re okay!”

She broke into a smile. Its radiance—reminiscent of fireworks exploding in the night sky—caused Feilong to recoil. He took one step back, the hand on his sword falling limply to his side.

“Um, I won’t be able to come here anymore,” That said, doing her best to speak clearly. “But I wrote a letter thanking you for everything you’ve done to help me.”

“Lina...” Feilong mumbled.

That cocked her head, not understanding the meaning of the word.

“Angelina,” Feilong stated more clearly this time.

“...Angelina?” That repeated in a whisper.

Feilong clapped a hand over his mouth and fell to his knees, his sword clattering against the ground. As he knelt before That, she held out her letter to him. Feilong reached beyond the letter, attempting to caress her soft cheek.

At that moment, Ryuho leapt in front of That and attempted to swipe Feilong’s hand away. Feilong drew his sword and parried Ryuho’s claws, a screeching sound accompanying a burst of red light.

Feilong regarded Ryuho with a cruel smile. Years of battle had conditioned him to kill this impertinent cat who dared raise its claws against him.

The man’s unflinching bloodlust sent a shiver down Ryuho’s spine. “We’ve gotta get out of here!” he shouted, his animalistic sense of danger compelling him to flee. “This guy is seriously bad news!”

“Ryuho?” That asked.

“Hold on tight!”

After grabbing That's collar with his teeth, Ryuho flung her onto his back. Once mounted, she clung to his neck with practiced hands. Though the letter slipped from her grasp, Feilong scrambled to grab it. At the same time, Ryuho bounded away with all the strength his legs could muster.

"What's wrong, Ryuho?!" That cried.

"We were just facing off with a cold-blooded killer!" the Flame Tiger shouted. "If you ever see him again, run for your life!"

Feilong didn't chase after the fleeing pair. He merely observed That's back until she faded into the distance. Once he could no longer see her or the Flame Tiger, he opened the letter. As the scent of a Guidepost Tree perfume wafted from the stationery, his eyelids drooped.

*Phaenna...*

A small candlelight flickered to life inside Feilong's frozen wasteland of a heart. Love and bittersweet grief trembled deep within his chest. A single inhale would snuff out that candlelight, and thus, Feilong held his breath.

The girl's writing was still clumsy, but compared to her messages prior to the campaign, her penmanship had improved beautifully. This letter didn't look like the work of a three-year-old. Her growth in such a short period of time filled the emperor with fatherly pride.

*When we first met, she was writing in the dirt with a branch, Feilong considered. No wonder she's improved. And I was the one who drove her into those circumstances.*

This final thought had a bitter edge to it. Despite being a princess, the girl hadn't owned her own pen or paper. She'd stained her fingers with berry juice to write on old scraps of cloth. Those actions spoke to her dire privations. Clearly, she'd been starved of knowledge, for she'd asked a man whose face she'd never seen to teach her.

*I never ordered anyone to forbid her study tools. I simply had no interest in her. I wanted to pretend that she didn't exist. In doing so, I never considered what would happen to her.*

Feilong's fingertips trembled, a sharp pain accompanying each breath. Finally,

he let out a deep sigh. Black smoke sizzled within his throbbing chest, filling his lungs with burning soot.

*Is this regret?*

He placed the tip of his nose against the stationery and inhaled deeply. The refreshing scent of perfume filled his nostrils. Years ago, he'd given this fragrance to his wife. It helped to clear away the black smoke clouding his chest, if only partially.

"If you regret the past, it's never too late to start over."

Feilong lifted his head. Had that been Phaenna's voice?

*Please, speak to me one more time, he prayed. I won't even ask to see your face.*

"Can I be forgiven, Phaenna?" Feilong asked.

No one answered his question. The Guidepost Tree twinkled like the stars overhead.

No. He could never be forgiven. Feilong was well aware of what he'd done. He'd treated his own daughter as his father had treated him. During Feilong's youth, his father hated him and drove him away, even though he'd committed no wrongdoing. As a result, Feilong ultimately killed his father.

*Children can't choose their parents. I know this better than anyone. Yet I committed the same act of stupidity as my father. Such foolishness could warrant my death as it did his.*

Before meeting That, Feilong hadn't feared death at another's hands. After Phaenna's passing, he'd lost the will to live. Nothing had mattered to him. He'd been mercilessly cruel to everyone he met, never fearing what enmities he might incur. Of course, others had tried to kill him countless times. However, no one strong enough to defeat the mighty Feilong had ever appeared.

*Would learning that I'm her father disappoint Lina?*

When he imagined her sky-blue eyes regarding him with scorn, Feilong trembled. Suddenly, his eyes widened in surprise.

*So, I still feared something after all?*

Biting his lip, Feilong placed the letter on his forehead and looked at the night sky. As the outer corners of his eyes burned, water seeped into the corners of the stationery, allowing starlight to shine through it.

The wellspring in his heart hadn't completely dried up.



**FEILONG** sat in the emperor's office. Recently, he'd only been returning to the North Star Sanctuary to sleep at night. Ostensibly, this was due to the sheer volume of post-war administrative cleanup required of him.

Though Kyril spoke about the tianshi in a reserved manner, Feilong hadn't mentally prepared himself to meet her. Yes, he longed for their reunion, but at the same time, he wasn't sure how to present himself. In the end, he tacitly allowed everyone to continue treating her as a tianshi, postponing the problem.

However, once his children slept at night, he would sneak into their room to observe their faces. Likewise, he sent presents to his daughter without revealing his name.

This slew of anonymous presents baffled That. Her closet had begun to overflow with gemstones. Likewise, different varieties of colored paper and the latest magical grimoires formed a pile on her desk. When Kyril saw a faintly glowing quill carelessly shoved into a pen holder, even he did a double take.

"This is the feather of an iridescent night heron." He smiled, amused.

Feilong's overzealousness was bordering on clumsy. Even so, relief washed over Kyril. Though their father hadn't visited them, he clearly wouldn't mistreat the tianshi.

On the other hand, That was bewildered. Having grown up in a storage shed, she couldn't fathom the value of the quill. Still, she couldn't use it carelessly as it was probably expensive. The first presents she'd ever received were the cake and clothes from Marfa on her third birthday. She didn't feel comfortable receiving gifts from a stranger.

"What am I s'posed to do with all this great stuff...?" she asked.

Her unfamiliarity with accepting presents broke Kyril's heart. "Use them



however you want,” he advised, hoping to allay her worries. “That’s what will most please the gift giver.”

“Really?”

“Indeed. They’ll be overjoyed if you use their presents.”

“Okay then, I’ll be super happy too!”

When the tianshi smiled, Kyril’s lips tugged upwards as well. His thoughts then turned towards their father.

*I do pity him for missing out on this smile.*



**FEILONG** was spending yet another day in his office. He’d turned down a number of meetings with Mion, citing post-war administrative cleanup as his reason. However, that excuse had reached the limits of its effectiveness.

Mion entered the room, her expression a mixture of sorrow and deep perplexity.

“Your Majesty,” Tomi addressed Feilong from his side. “Chief Lady in Waiting Mion has come to report on a problem concerning the inner court.”

As Tomi relayed that in a businesslike tone, Feilong regarded Mion in a similarly businesslike manner. The emperor’s blank expression filled Mion with relief. In her estimation, it indicated disinterest in That. Thus, she spoke in a sincere voice laden with emotion.

“As a result of my careless supervision, *That* has set foot in the North Star Palace.”

Feilong nodded. “I see.”

His curt response took Mion aback. She’d expected him to fly into a fit of rage. She had no idea how to respond to his brusque attitude.

“After taking pity on the girl, Prince Kyril falsely introduced her as a tianshi,” Mion continued. “He’s instructed everyone to treat her as a guest. Obviously, I couldn’t defy him...”

“Understood,” Feilong responded tersely, waving his hand to dismiss Mion.

“You may leave.”

Overcome with panic, Mion continued arguing. “But, Your Majesty, this situation could have a negative impact on Prince Kyril if it continues. He’s allowing That to attend his studies, and they’re playing with a tiger.”

Feilong’s eyebrows twitched. “A tiger?”

“Yes, an orange tiger. The creature is horrifyingly ferocious, and it will only listen to That. I’m frightened out of my wits, and I have no idea how to handle the matter...”

Feilong bitterly recalled the tiger that had parried his sword with its claws. At the same time, it also piqued his interest. He had a childlike fondness for strong people and creatures.

“According to the reports, it’s a Flame Tiger,” Feilong said.

“Yet another example of That’s lies,” Mion replied. “Flame Tigers are Nanranese holy beasts. Do you actually believe such creatures exist? The girl is deceiving everyone.”

Feilong glanced up at Mion. “Do you not believe the Golden Dragon exists either?”

“No, Jinlongian holy beasts can’t be compared to those of barbarians,” Mion responded, choosing her words carefully. “And even if their holy beasts *do* exist, they shouldn’t be allowed within the palace.”

Mion had a point. Even Feilong had difficulty accepting the sudden appearance of a Flame Tiger.

*Still, could a mere tiger cub have parried my blade? he wondered. Perhaps a Flame Tiger could have, but according to legend, they serve no one. Why would a foreign holy beast protect that child?*

When Feilong looked at Tomi, the prime minister regarded him with an unchanging expression. “Your Majesty, might I suggest meeting with this guest known as the tianshi?”

Feilong went silent. He couldn’t allow things to continue like this forever. At the same time, he feared Angelina discovering his identity.

As Feilong remained silent, another wave of relief washed over Mion. *The emperor still wants nothing to do with his daughter*, she thought.

“There’s no reason to bother you when you’re so busy, Your Majesty,” she said. “My job is to keep That out of your sight. Respectfully, however, I will need your permission to defy Prince Kyril.”

Feilong considered her words silently. If he left this matter to Mion, the situation would return to its previous state. Angelina wouldn’t be allowed to study. Likewise, she would endure plebeian food, shelter, and clothes again. Feilong had been the original cause of her privations. When he imagined returning her to such a life, a haze of distress coiled around his heart. Thus, he drummed his fingers against his desk.

*Her charm saved my army countless times*, he thought. *I only ended the battle so quickly, thanks to her and the Golden Dragon. I want to welcome her into the palace as a princess as soon as possible. Yet once she learns who I am, she’ll probably be frightened of me. She no doubt loathes her cruel, merciless father, after all.*

When he imagined Angelina’s azure eyes burning with hatred, Feilong bit his lip.

*I’m merely reaping what I sowed. No. I don’t want to see her face, but I can’t allow things to continue like this.*

Mion and Tomi waited for Feilong’s decision. Finally, the emperor stopped drumming his desk, steeled himself, and lifted his head.

“Very well then,” he mumbled.

Mion broke out into a smile, and Tomi averted his gaze.

“What are your orders, my emperor?” Mion asked.

“Bring the tianshi and the Flame Tiger here.”

Mion donned a self-satisfied smile. “I’ll be back right away, Your Majesty!”

Once Mion had departed, Feilong turned to Tomi and asked, “Has she always managed the Big Dipper Garden this proactively?”

“Yes,” Tomi answered awkwardly. “She’s a diligent woman, after all.”



**EXULTATION** carried Mion towards That. *With Feilong's backing, I'll finally be able to punish the little brat,* she thought.

*"If I ever see her again, I'll kill her,"* the emperor once said. Once Mion brought the girl before him, she would almost certainly face execution.

*With That gone, Prince Kyril will be the only successor to the throne. To protect the royal bloodline, Feilong will need a new empress. Under these circumstances, advising him to remarry won't be disrespectful.*

Upon arriving in Kyril's room, Mion found That absent. According to a handmaid, the girl had gone to the Canopy. Thus, Mion headed there with two knights escorting her. The knights had brown hair and gray hair, respectively.

Inside the Canopy, That was playing tag with the children of hostages. Junshi had instructed her to interact with as many people as possible, thereby spreading awareness of the tianshi. In accordance with this advice, That had made it a point to go outside.

*It's pretty good advice, all things considered,* she thought.

Spreading awareness of That would better ensure her safety. Executing an unknown child who lived in a storehouse would be easy. However, executing a widely known tianshi would prove much more difficult.

Tiny as she was, That rode atop Ryuho while playing tag with the other kids. Meanwhile, Junshi watched over her.

As Mion observed the children frolicking and squealing with delight, her face contorted with disgust. *How can she befriend the spawn of savages?!* she shrieked internally. *Filth attracts more filth, I suppose.*

"That!" Mion shouted all of a sudden. "Get over here this instant, girl!"

In response to Mion's unexpected appearance, That stiffened from shock. The blood drained from her cheeks, turning her face ghostly white. Mion's severe tone brought the other children to a halt as well, their eyes widening with surprise. Even Junshi straightened his posture.

"That's the chief lady in waiting," the surrounding crowd whispered.

“What are you doing here, girl?” Mion asked. “Who gave you permission to be here?”

While still carrying That, Ryuho promptly turned his back on Mion and began to march away.

“The emperor has summoned you and that tiger,” Mion called out to them.

As she spoke these heavy words, a large cloud crossed the sky, casting a shadow over the Canopy. Ryuho stopped in his tracks.

“Me too?” he asked.

That was at a loss for words.

Mion donned a self-satisfied smile. “Let’s go,” she said with feigned kindness.

As the cold wind grazed That’s cheek, a single child attempted to run up to her. “Are you leaving, Tianshi?” he asked.

“Quiet!” one of the surrounding adults instructed, halting the child.

All the while, the crowd muttered among themselves while watching.

After breathing a single sigh, That squared her shoulders and looked up. “Let’s go, Ryuho.”

“Really?” the Flame Tiger asked.

That nodded firmly. “I won’t run away.”

Sooner or later, she would have to meet the emperor. After hearing of his return, she’d expected to be punished within the day. Though Kyril had promised to protect her, things couldn’t remain like this forever.

*Also, I need to receive a name by my fifth birthday, she thought. I’ll do whatever I can to accomplish that. As the bar owner used to say, “You can always turn a tight spot into an opportunity.”*

“Let’s go, Ryuho,” That said, having found her resolve.

The Flame Tiger walked towards Mion while still carrying her on his back. “You got it.”

“Get down from there,” Mion ordered. “You would dare approach the

emperor on the back of a filthy, violent tiger?”

“What did you say?!” Ryuho bellowed.

That meekly climbed off his back. “Understood.”

“Even so, the journey will take too long on a child’s legs,” Junshi said. “I’ll carry her.”

“Why are you even here?” Mion asked, glaring at him.

“I—”

“Have you misunderstood something, perhaps? You have no authority in the inner court, no matter how deeply Prince Kyril might trust you.” After reprimanding Junshi in the sweetest of tones, Mion leaned over and whispered into his ear, “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

She spoke softly enough that no one overheard her. Shuddering, Junshi hung his head. “With His Majesty’s return, I won’t allow you to have free reign of the inner court anymore,” she’d just declared.

“I can walk myself,” That said. Her face flushed as she slurred again.

The brown-haired knight knelt in front of her, wearing a reassuring smile. “There’s no need to rush. Tell me if your legs start to hurt, all right?”

“Okay. Thanks a bunch.”

Hearing this exchange spiked Mion’s irritation. “Let’s go!” she cried out sternly, turning her back on them.

And so That followed behind Mion, with Junshi in the rear. Everyone watched as a young girl toddled down the long, straight, wide road. Interposed between two knights, she looked like a criminal being led to execution. As the onlookers regarded her with pitying eyes, the brown-haired knight turned to look at her countless times, deeply concerned.

“What are you doing?!” Mion shouted at the knight, who kept coming to a halt. “Hurry up!”

“If you’re in such a hurry, wouldn’t it be faster to pick her up?” Junshi asked. “Toddlers take much smaller steps than adults.”

Mion responded with a scornful glare, causing him to fall silent.

The steps of the Celestial Axe's staircase were quite tall. That had to place her hands on the ridge of each polished, black step to clamber up them. All the while, Ryuho nudged her rear with the tip of his nose to help her ascend.

The brown-haired knight squeezed both his hands into fists. "You've got this—keep going!" he cheered her on in a low voice.

Unable to help herself, That smiled. The emperor's office was at the top of the tower. By the time she finally reached the ninth floor, dirt covered her hands and skirt. As such, she patted down her dress, brushing off what dust she could. Her lack of tears grieved Junshi.

Conversely, Mion bristled with irritation. *This comes to an end now!* she thought, opening the door to the office. She dragged That into the room and forced her to stand before the emperor. "I've brought the girl, Your Majesty," she announced.

Upon seeing Feilong, That's eyes widened. *Isn't he the knight from the Guidepost Tree...?*

"This guy's the emperor?!" Ryuho shouted.

"Show some respect!" Mion demanded, pushing down on That's head.

That staggered helplessly and got down on her knees. *Kyril told me not to bow to him, but the same rules probably don't apply to the emperor,* she thought.

Breath held, That struggled to recall the contents of the book on military and court etiquette. She needed to show the utmost respect. However, as she tried to place her head on the floor, a hand appeared in front of her.

"Are you okay?" Feilong asked.

Reflexively, That tried to take his hand but noticed how dirty her own hands were. While turning out her pockets to find a handkerchief, she also noticed how grimy her dress was.

"M-My hands are dushty," she stammered.

*Why do I have to slur now?!*

That hung her head, verging on tears.

Feilong wiped her hand with his own robe. "I don't mind," he said.

"Shank you sho much..." That mumbled. Her mouth had stiffened due to nerves, and she couldn't speak properly. Nevertheless, Feilong helped her to her feet.

*This man is the emperor, right? That thought. Didn't he vow to kill me if he ever saw me again? Am I about to be executed?!*

Still on the verge of tears, her teeth chattered with fright.

"The girl still hasn't paid you the proper respect, Your Majesty," Mion said.

Despite pointing this out gently, she was seething on the inside.

Feilong shook his head. "There's no need for such a small child to pay respects."

The emperor trembled with rage. Why had Mion brought Angelina before him like a criminal? Confronted with the consequences of his prolonged negligence, he couldn't forgive himself. He resolved to protect her forevermore, regardless of what happened or how much she loathed him.

The surrounding courtiers observed Feilong intently, his behavior perplexing them. Tomi furrowed his brow, unsure of how to respond.

That raised her head timidly. "I would like to pay my reshpects."

Feilong regarded her with an impassive expression. "Very well then."

*I can't accept special treatment just because I'm a small, pathetic child, That thought. Who knows what reasons Mion might invent to criticize me later?*

Once again, That got to her knees and placed her head on the ground. The courtiers stirred. During the previous emperor's reign, this had been the greatest show of respect. However, no one performed this bow anymore. Thus, it astounded them to see a young girl doing so.

"The three kneels and nine bows has been abolished," Tomi said, racing over to stop her. "Please stand, child."

After standing, That saluted by placing her left fist over her chest and covering



it with her right hand. “Blood of the imperial line, thou art a gemstone more precious than the Heavenly Lightning Bolt,” she recited. “Thou doth possess the scale of the Golden Dragon. I greet thee with the utmost respect, Emperor Feilong—resplendent light of Jinlong.”

Following That’s greeting, a deathly silence fell over the room. As Tomi nodded in satisfaction, That lowered her head, dripping with cold sweat.

*Wh-What should I do...?* she wondered. *Did I make a mistake?*

Mion glared at That, her expression furious. *Where the hell did she learn to talk like that?* the chief lady cursed inwardly. *I was expecting her to make a mistake while paying her respects. Then I could have charged her with blasphemy against the emperor!*

“Mion,” Feilong said coldly. “Are you the one who taught this child the three kneels and nine bows?”

Mion squeezed her hand into a fist. “I did no such thing, Your Majesty.”

Feilong glared back at her. “Then did this child somehow learn it by herself?”

“I did,” That cut in. “I had no one to teach me, after all.”

Her words were a punch to Feilong’s gut. *That’s right—the idea of giving this child anything never even occurred to me,* he thought. *Even so, she strove to obtain knowledge for herself.*

Feilong couldn’t define the burning feeling in his chest. Nevertheless, he wanted to touch the girl in front of him. Guided by his emotions, he attempted to pat her on the head. In response, That squeezed her eyes shut, stiffening. She expected Feilong to hit her. At first, the emperor had no idea how to proceed, and he let his hand hover in the air. Then he slowly patted her hair with a featherlight touch.

*Wait, he was just trying to pat my head?* That thought, looking up timidly.

“You displayed the perfect etiquette,” Feilong said, simultaneously curt and awkward.

*Is he praising me...?*

With the threat of violence gone, the tension drained from That’s body. As

relief washed over her, she smiled limply. At that moment, Feilong swept her up in his arms.

“Your Majesty!” That squealed.

“Lina...”

As the emperor spoke this word, the courtiers gasped.

“Lina?” That asked, cocking her head.

Hadn’t the emperor called her by such a name underneath the Guidepost Tree?

“Your name is Angelina,” Feilong clarified. “Your mother gave it to you. It means tianshi.”

And so, Angelina spoke her name out loud for the first time ever. She recited it several times, trying to get a feel for it. “Ange... lina. Angelina.”

*Did Kyril know my actual name?* Angelina wondered, her chest filling with warmth. *Is that why he called me Tianshi? From the beginning, I always had a name?*

“And I’m your father,” Feilong introduced himself.

“...Fodder?” That repeated, cocking her head as tears welled in her eyes.

The courtiers sighed while clutching their chests, the sheer cuteness overwhelming them.

Feilong nodded. “That’s right. I’m your fodder.”

These few words astounded the courtiers. Everyone looked away, but at the same time, the warm and gentle atmosphere coaxed smiles onto their lips. No one had ever expected the cruel, merciless emperor to call himself *fodder*.

Tomi pressed down on the inner corners of his eyes. After losing Phaenna, Feilong’s heart turned cold. At last, the emperor—his nephew—had regained his former warmth.

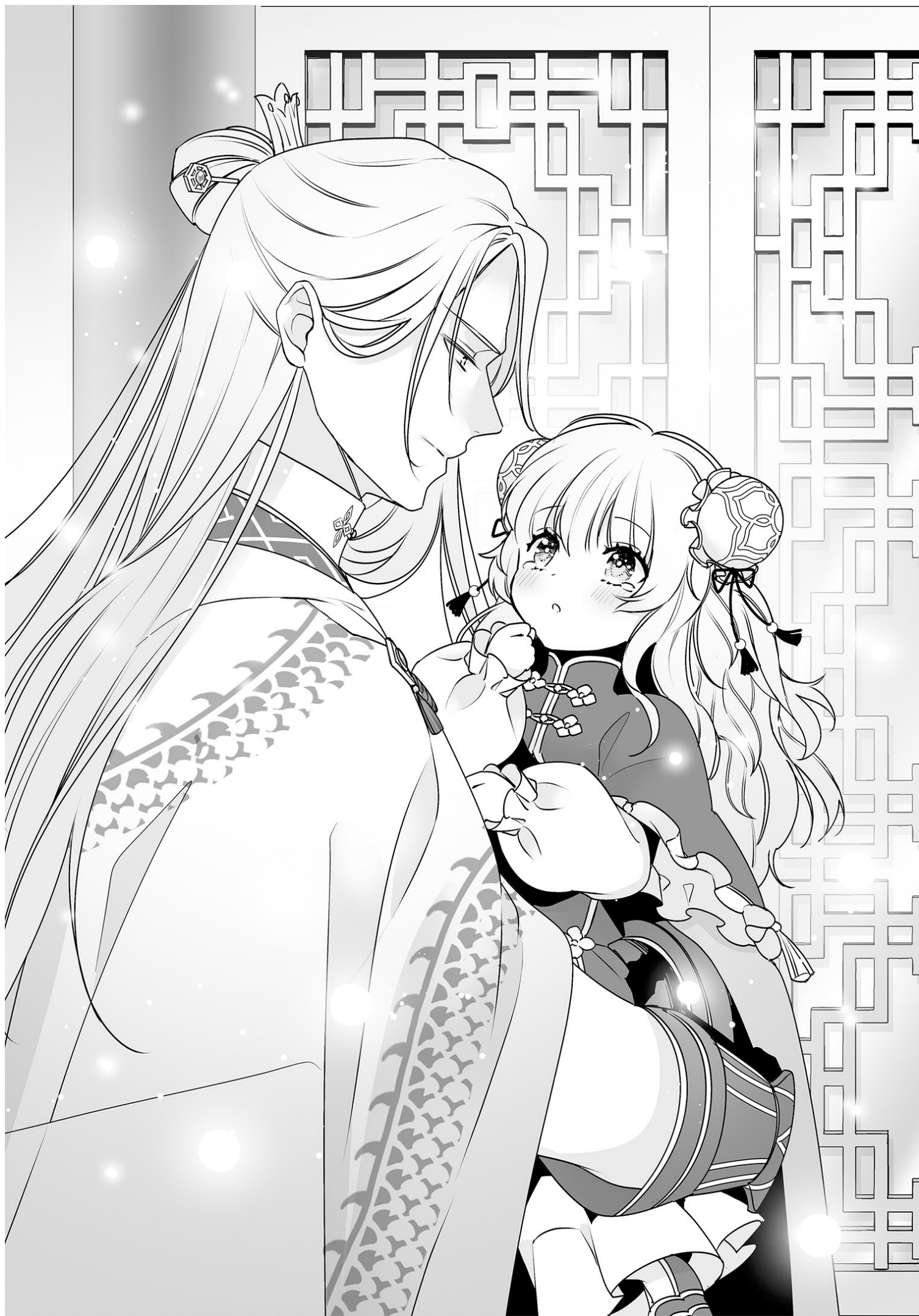
“Fodder,” Angelina murmured again.

Feilong took her small hand and placed it against his cheek. “That’s right, Angelina. I’m your fodder.”

Something burst inside Angelina's chest. *This man is my father—the emperor who abandoned me.*

She needed to act properly in order to gain his approval. Nevertheless, she couldn't suppress her emotions. The floodgates opened, and tears streamed down her cheeks.





Across all her lives, Angelina had never met her father. Though she had memories of being despised, she had no memories of being loved. She'd never sought love either, fully realizing the futility of doing so. Only survival had mattered to her, and her feelings towards her father had disappeared long ago. Or so she'd believed. Now, a storm of furious emotions erupted within Angelina's chest.

*If he was going to accept me, why didn't he rescue me earlier? Why did he even abandon me in the first place? Why did he call me That when I had a real name all along?!*

"Why?" Angelina cried out, pounding her fists against Feilong's chest.

She couldn't articulate her resentment. Instead, she sobbed out this single word, her chest a chaotic swirl of emotions.

"I'm sorry," Feilong said, squeezing Angelina.

Angelina resisted by pounding her fists against his chest. Feilong did nothing to stop her. On the contrary, he continued holding onto her. In his heart, he swore to never let go of her again.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "I'm so sorry. I've made nothing but mistakes."

Angelina had suffered many hardships across her lives. This simple apology couldn't absolve Feilong of everything she'd endured. If she hadn't been his daughter and hadn't been called That, she wouldn't have been killed three times.

*So why am I happy in spite of everything? Angelina wondered. I don't want to feel happy. I don't want to get my hopes up only to be betrayed again!*

Unable to process her emotions, Angelina wriggled inside Feilong's arms, her shoe kicking his sword. The charm she'd given to her knight-teacher was fastened to it.

*All else aside, he taught me magical script without prying into my circumstances, Angelina thought. Is that why I'm happy? He's even treating my charm like a valued possession, even though the war is over. Regardless of whether he came home unscathed, it's too dirty and ragged for such a fine*

sword.

“You didn’t throw away my charm,” Angelina said.

“How could I?” Feilong asked. When she didn’t respond, he continued, “Thank you for bestowing a tianshi’s protection upon me, Angelina.”

That coaxed a smile from Angelina. However, she bit her lip. *I’m glad my knight-teacher is safe, but I don’t want to smile at Father*, she thought. Feeling awkward, she punched his chest again. The emperor didn’t loosen his embrace in the slightest. No matter how much she thrashed about, he squeezed her tightly, refusing to let go.

*No matter how much I cry or shout, I won’t be executed*, Angelina realized. *Do I not have to restrain myself or grovel anymore?*

As a test, she buried her tear-stained face in Feilong’s expensive robes. Rather than flaring up angrily, the emperor patted her on the back clumsily. Sighing with relief, Angelina untensed her body and leaned into Feilong’s chest. *Everything’s fine now*, she thought. *I can just enjoy being in his arms.*

The emperor readjusted his grip on Angelina, sitting her up in the crook of his right arm. While looking around the office, he announced, “You are all in the presence of Princess Angelina.”

In response, the courtiers turned in her direction. Everyone placed their right fists over their chests, covering them with their left hands.

Seeing this, Mion could no longer remain silent. “Please wait, Your Majesty! The girl is still only three years old! No one has ever become a princess before the Naming Trial on their fifth birthday!”

At that moment, Ryuho opened his mouth and snarled. His roar turned into a hot wind that attacked Mion and the emperor. Though a Flame Tiger’s fire wouldn’t harm the people under its protection, it would burn everyone else mercilessly.

Mion shrieked, the overwhelming heat causing her to stagger. As the hot wind blew through her hair, it crackled and produced a burning stench.

Meanwhile, Feilong shielded Angelina with his arms. His magic clashed with

Ryuhō's flames, generating a vortex of wind that swirled between them. Though the emperor's arms sizzled, the wind lost its heat before touching Angelina. In the end, it merely blew back her pink hair.

From the sidelines, Tomi regarded Ryuhō with fear and respect. "Just as I suspected, a Flame Tiger's fire truly does protect its master..."

The gust of wind had exposed Angelina's ears to the room.

"The Inverted Scale...!" Feilong cried out, reflexively touching the back of her left ear. This sparkling, golden scale was the same as his. Normally, children only received their Inverted Scale after overcoming their Naming Trial. Along with it, they also received a royal title.

Mion's eyes widened. At the same time, Angelina's eyes darted around the room.

"Inverted Scale...?" she repeated, not understanding the situation.

The Golden Dragon had given her his scale as she'd slept. She hadn't known anything about it.

After tucking Angelina's pink hair behind her ear, Feilong guided her small finger to the scale. "This is the Inverted Scale," he said. "It proves your right to succession."

Angelina looked at Ryuhō. "Did you know about this?" she asked.

"Yeah, I saw the dragon put it in your ear," the Flame Tiger responded.

Angelina gaped. "The Golden Dragon did?"

"Yep. While you were sleeping. That dragon might not look like it, but he's a raging perv."

Angelina burst out laughing.

"What about the Golden Dragon?" Feilong asked.

"Ryuhō says Mishter Dragon gave me this scale," Angelina explained.

"I see. Then the Golden Dragon loves you as well."

Angelina stared deep into her father's eyes. *By "as well," does he mean himself too?* she wondered.



Feilong detected no trace of loathing in her azure eyes. He let out a sigh of relief and gave her a firm pat on the head. Angelina grinned, trying to hide her embarrassment from being stared at so much. Her bashful expression coaxed a smile from Feilong as well.

*How long has it been since I patted a child's head?* he wondered. *Will this make her happy?*

When Kyril's face flashed across his mind's eye, Feilong's chest stung. He didn't know how to interact with children. He'd never known his own father's love, either.

*I've hurt Kyril too,* he thought. *Could I have been a worse father? Will I be able to change starting now?*

The small bundle of warmth in his arms was so fleeting. As he considered this, his chest tightened painfully.

"This child is Princess Angelina," Feilong pronounced again in a stately voice. "Henceforth, you shall treat her as such."

Mion collapsed to her knees. "Ridiculous... This is unacceptable."

Tomi leveled a cool glare at her. "You will serve Princess Angelina with the utmost sincerity, Chief Lady Mion. She is now in charge of the inner court, after all."

Mion hung her head. "Yes," she replied, her voice dripping with loathing.

## Chapter 8: The New Life of the Named Princess

**SOON** afterward, Angelina's life changed drastically. The knights and palace ladies from the Big Dipper Garden officially moved into the North Star Sanctuary. Mion still served as the chief lady in waiting as no one was yet capable of replacing her. Even so, Angelina had become the inner court's highest authority. Thus, no one would dare cause her any harm.

Recently, Angelina had even been given her own room. Unfortunately, it was right next to Feilong's, which made her feel awkward. Though she liked her knight-teacher, she still had difficulty interacting with her father. In the end, she continued living in Kyril's room, as she'd been doing.

When Feilong first visited Angelina's room to look at her sleeping face, her bed was empty. After racing over to Kyril's room, he found Ryuho and his children sleeping side by side. This sight had displeased Feilong, but considering how terrible of a father he'd been, he couldn't order Angelina around in good conscience.

As the princess, Angelina had a new schedule. She studied throughout the morning, with Feilong himself teaching her magic. Never before had an emperor served as someone's instructor. The royal family had never given much time to childrearing, after all. Usually, the children's wet nurses served as their primary caretakers. Thus, everyone could see the depth of Feilong's love for Angelina.

Every midday, Angelina had lunch with Kyril and Ryuho. At three in the afternoon, she distributed snacks to the offices, which also served as exercise. With her remaining time, she wandered around the palace, played in the garden, or visited the library. In short, she spent her time however she wished. Since Feilong's return, she'd been able to spend more time with Kyril and Junshi since their responsibilities had lessened. Of course, Ryuho always accompanied her.

Finally, Feilong had ordered his children to have a family dinner with him each

night. This sudden change in his father had surprised Kyril. Until now, they'd always eaten separately. Personally, Feilong worried that Angelina would never speak to him without this dinner.

However, Angelina didn't like eating without Ryuho by her side. After realizing this, Kyril suggested that the Flame Tiger join them. Shortly after, another seat was provided for him. Now, the four gathered around the same dinner table every night. Since Angelina still struggled to interact with Feilong, having Ryuho act as a buffer filled her with relief. On the other hand, the tiger's presence greatly displeased Feilong.

Following Angelina's sudden elevation to the princess, the people of the Right Enclosure had started keeping a slight distance from her. They weren't sure how to treat her now, as no one younger than five had ever been recognized as royalty. Moreover, Feilong had ostracized her until recently. Since he could change his mind at any moment, people avoided Angelina as a self-protective measure. No one relished getting caught in the blowback, after all.

Whenever Angelina went for a walk, no one called out to her amicably anymore. Rather, people whispered about her as she passed. Whenever he heard this, Ryuho's ears would pin back in displeasure. While these new circumstances saddened Angelina, she considered herself powerless to change them.

Though Angelina's former caretakers had moved into the sanctuary, she visited the storehouse occasionally. There, she would read what diaries and books the wicker cabinet had to offer. Angelina thought of the wicker cabinet as an older sister, so naturally, she'd told her about receiving a name.

At one point, Angelina tried moving the cabinet to the sanctuary, but it had been too heavy to budge. As a last measure, she'd considered emptying its contents. However, so long as she'd harbored this intention, the lock had remained firmly in place. *Perhaps the wicker cabinet doesn't want to move*, Angelina finally realized. With this in mind, she'd begun visiting the storehouse with Ryuho.

A light drizzle had persisted for the past month. The rain-soaked windflowers and cosmoses appeared to be trembling from the cold. Despite the lack of

downpours, the sun hadn't shone for a long while, producing an air of gloom.

Since Angelina and Ryuho couldn't play outside, they rolled around on the second floor of the storehouse. Yes, the sanctuary was pleasant, but no matter what they did, knights and palace ladies always interfered. While Angelina's free time was diminishing, her exhaustion was growing.

"Being a princess sure is tough..." she muttered dejectedly.

Ryuho laughed. "It's because you're *Lina*, not because you're the princess."

Ever since Angelina had received her name, Ryuho had begun calling her Lina as a pet name. Feilong and Kyril were the only other people who called her Lina.

When Ryuho plopped his hindquarters onto Angelina's lap, she leaned into his back. In the dim light of the storehouse's second floor, his soft fur seemed to glow with faint orange light. Ryuho's presence warmed Angelina to the very core of her heart.

"You're so fluffy," Angelina said. Blissfully, she buried her face in his back. Pleased, Ryuho caressed her with his tail, causing her to giggle. "That tickles."

"Hey, you're tickling me, too," Ryuho replied.

"In a bad way?"

"Not at all. Gimme some more head pats."

Their delighted laughter filled the second floor of the storehouse—their secret hideaway.

Suddenly, two voices echoed from outside. Peering down from the circular window, Angelina and Ryuho saw two manservants gossiping.

"Is this storehouse going to be torn down already?" one asked.

"Probably," the other replied. "There's no need for it anymore, what with the princess living in the palace now."

"Speaking of which, have you heard the rumors about her?"

"That she's a tianshi?"

"No, that she's the cause of this long spell of rain."

“Oh, yeah. Supposedly, she fabricated the Inverted Scale and provoked the dragon’s wrath, right?”

“Exactly. Worse, there’s going to be an even bigger disaster soon.”

“You’re gonna give me nightmares with these rumors.”

“Well, she’s the daughter of a Yulan witch. It’s entirely possible.”

“Whoa, don’t let anyone hear you say that!”

“Do you remember how many families were massacred for Empress Phaenna’s sake? My master was one of those victims. And from what I’ve heard, the princess has her father and brother wrapped around her little finger. Apparently, she can even use healing magic. Maybe she can bewitch people as well.”

Ryuhō bristled, preparing to growl at the two men. After clapping a hand over his mouth, Angelina hid them beneath the window.

“Cut it out with the dumb jokes,” the more skeptical man said. “This is still part of the palace.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” the other one replied.

With those final words, they retreated from the storehouse. When Angelina removed her hand from Ryuhō’s mouth, he let out a sputtering breath.

“Why aren’t you pissed?!” he yelled. “Mion’s obviously the one spreading those rumors! That’s why everyone in the Right Enclosure is giving you the cold shoulder!”

However, the men’s conversation reminded Angelina of something from her first life. “We have bigger things to worry about right now!” she cried, dashing over to the wicker cabinet to throw open its doors. “A disaster might actually occur!”

“But I saw the Golden Dragon give you his scale!”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about. This long spell of rain might cause a landslide!”

During her first life, a landslide originated from the mountain behind the Big

Dipper Garden. Since a magical barrier protected the palace, no one in the garden was harmed. Even so, Angelina would never forget being alone in the storehouse that night, the rumbling ground filling her with dread. No one had come to save her, and she hadn't been able to run away either. She had cowered beneath her thin blanket, quivering.

According to what Angelina had learned in her first loop, many people outside the palace had died in this landslide. Unfortunately, it occurred during the middle of the Five Hundred Days War. As a result, the government couldn't pay much attention to the disaster.

The bar owner had lost his siblings in the disaster. No matter how many years passed, their deaths still tormented him.

*People with dozens of loved ones died because of that landslide, Angelina had thought. Yet, even though no one loved me, I still survived.*

That realization plagued her with guilt.

Papers flapped as Angelina rummaged through the cabinet. "There might be stories about the past in here," she said.

As if responding to her desperation, the wooden tag hanging from her neck floated upwards, pointing towards a single book.

"This one?" she asked.

Angelina grabbed the book, which seemed to be an old diary. The book began flipping through its pages automatically before coming to a stop. The writing on the opened page seemed to glow. However, she couldn't read the characters. They were written in old, skillful calligraphy. Fortunately, when she peered through the wooden tag, the characters transformed into legible writing.

"This diary mentions a landslide!" Angelina cried. "Listen to this: 'It's been one hundred years since the last landslide. I wonder if another one will occur soon.' ...And the date of this entry is close to ours!"

Ryuhō's eyes widened. "Then—"

"Let's go to the library," Angelina interrupted. "We won't be able to learn anything too specific from just this diary."

“Okay.”

Ryuhō turned his back to Angelina, and she climbed on top of him.

“Hold on tight!” he shouted.

Angelina clung to Ryuhō’s neck with both hands, rendering her unable to hold an umbrella. Once certain of her grip, Ryuhō ran with all his might. Since meeting Angelina, he’d experienced several growth spurts. To any onlookers, it appeared like an orange tiger was streaking across the light rain like a bolt of lightning.

Upon arriving at the library, Angelina climbed off Ryuhō and stood before the Golden Dragon. “Mishter Dragon!” she called out to him.

“What’s wrong, Angelina?” he asked.

She and the dragon had become good friends during her frequent visits to the library.

“A landslide might happen soon!” she cried. “I need to research old stories on the topic.”

After opening the library doors, the Golden Dragon led them to a specific bookshelf without hesitation. As Angelina and Ryuhō jogged after him, the dragon picked out an old, voluminous textbook on history. Perhaps due to the wooden tag’s magic, the book floated into Angelina’s hands and flipped through its pages automatically. Once it had come to a stop, the relevant passages began to glow. Without pausing, Angelina used the wooden tag to read the textbook.

“F-Found it!” she shouted. “Here, I’ll read out loud. ‘When a landslide reached the Purple Forbidden Palace, a Guidepost Tree was planted to mark the boundary. You mustn’t expand the palace beyond this point.’” Angelina stopped reading and whipped her head up. “This is talking about the Big Dipper Garden, right?!”

“Oh, that Guidepost Tree,” the Golden Dragon replied nonchalantly. “Perhaps two hundred years ago, a landslide originated from Mt. Saurian, and the debris reached that point. Afterward, the Guidepost Tree was planted there to mark the boundary of the disaster. Even so, a landslide will no longer reach any part

of the Big Dipper Garden. It was created after the magical barrier had been erected around the palace.”

“But the debris will still cascade around the palace!” Angelina cried out, her expression frantic. “We can’t let that happen!”

“Princess Angelina,” the Golden Dragon replied, regarding her fondly. “As the bearer of the Tianshi’s Protective Seal, you may ride upon my back.”

As the dragon increased in size, Angelina and Ryuho climbed on his back. After slipping through the library doors, the dragon took to the skies, soaring towards the Celestial Axe Tower. When he wrapped himself around the highest floor, the people inside the office panicked.

“Your Majesty, the Golden Dragon!” a courtier shouted. “The Golden Dragon is right outside the window!”

Feilong glanced out the window. There, Angelina and Ryuho were riding atop the dragon’s back.

Yuen was standing beside the emperor, and his eyes widened. Despite having heard about the situation from his father, Tomi, he hadn’t believed the details. Outside the window of the ninth floor, however, an adorable girl was riding on the back of the royal family’s protective deity. Seeing the actual dragon, Yuen regarded Angelina—who greatly resembled Phaenna—with a mixture of fear and envy.

Feilong threw the window open, allowing rain into the office. “Lina, I’m coming for you!” he bellowed, placing one foot on the windowsill and preparing to jump onto the dragon.

“Stay put, you imbecile!” the dragon roared. “I came to deliver the princess. She won’t be able to enter with you blocking the window.”

In response to this scolding, Feilong scrambled down from the windowsill. At the same time, Ryuho grabbed Angelina’s collar with his teeth and sprang into the office.

“Fodder!” Angelina cried, holding a book in both her hands.

This single word moved Feilong. She hardly ever addressed him as Father.



“Lina,” he replied.

“Bad news, Fodder! There’s gonna be a landshlide!”

In response to this rain-soaked girl’s cries of warning, a small commotion broke out in the office.

Tomi used a towel to wipe Angelina down. Before long, Feilong stole the towel and wiped her down himself. Yuen tried and failed to hide his surprise. Feilong wasn’t the sort to show affection to children, and Tomi had always been strict with the children in his family as well.

“Now, what’s this about a landslide, Princess?” Tomi asked kindly.

As evidence, Angelina showed everyone the book she’d brought from the library.

“Even if there *is* a landslide, the magical barrier will keep us safe,” Tomi replied soothingly.

“But what will happen to the people outside the palace?” Angelina asked. “What will happen to all the ruined fields?”

The office fell silent.

“Lina,” Feilong spoke up. “Do you know what the damage looked like during the last landslide?”

Nodding, Angelina unfolded a map on top of his desk. It contained records of the damage from two hundred years ago.

“According to this, no houses suffered any damage,” Tomi noted.

“But the Big Dipper Garden didn’t exist back then!” Angelina appealed to him desperately.

She used her finger to draw the current scope of the palace on top of the map. The Big Dipper Garden was within range of the landslide, and the expanded barrier accommodated the garden. As a result, the landslide debris would strike the barrier and fork off to either side.

“When the debris forks off, it’ll cause more damage to the surrounding area,” Angelina explained.

“That certainly is a possibility,” Tomi grumbled. “Still, does anyone know if a landslide will actually occur...?”

When the prime minister looked around the room, everyone shook their heads in disbelief.

“Please take down the magical barrier temporarily,” Angelina pleaded. “That’ll be more than enough.”

There was no point in protecting an abandoned garden. Withdrawing the barrier to the North Star Sanctuary could reduce the damage. In fact, the barrier was near the sanctuary before the garden’s existence.

The courtiers whispered among themselves.

“But still...”

“Can we trust this information?”

“What if our enemies attack while the barrier is down?”

Meanwhile, Yuen observed the scene silently.

*No one is going to believe the words of a child,* Angelina thought while hanging her head. *I should have expected that.*

Overcome with disappointment and resignation, she looked outside the window. The Golden Dragon was still there.

“...Okay, I’ll just leave then,” she said, placing her hand on the windowsill. She would ask for the dragon’s help and do what she could on her own. “Let’s go, Ryuho.”

As Angelina turned towards the Flame Tiger, Feilong picked her up.

“Don’t go,” the emperor pleaded. He didn’t want to disappoint his daughter ever again. While still holding her, he began issuing orders. “Erect a new barrier at the entrance of the Big Dipper Garden! Once finished, release the magic protecting the garden!”

“Doesn’t that seem somewhat rash, Your Majesty?” a courtier challenged.

“The barrier has an ancient foundation predating the garden. New magic can be cast there.”

“Even so, we don’t have enough sorcerers.”

Feilong nodded. “Then Kyril and I will go as well.”

“But Your Majesty, we’re not even sure if a landslide will occur yet!”

“Will we have time to spare once we know for certain?!” the emperor roared. “Perhaps we would, but either way, the garden has fallen out of use. Is there a problem with removing it from the protected area?!”

Angelina looked up at Feilong, her eyes wide with surprise. “You believe me, Fodder?”

Feilong nodded bashfully and then returned to issuing orders. “Yuen, gather the knights and come up with a disaster response plan!”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Yuen replied, dashing away to follow this order.

Immediately, the courtiers scrambled about the office. While some unfolded maps of the erstwhile barrier, others arranged to mobilize the sorcerers.

Ignoring the tense atmosphere, the Golden Dragon stuck his nose into the office. “So, the cruel emperor turns into a doting father before the tianshi?” Following this question, he laughed uproariously, his breath sending a tremor through the office. After removing his face from the window, he spun around and presented his back to the office. “Climb aboard, Angelina and Ryuho. You too, Emperor Whelp.”

“Whelp?” Feilong repeated with a disgruntled expression. Nevertheless, he followed orders.

While carrying the trio on his back, the dragon soared upwards, piercing through the rain clouds. The full moon glowed white against the backdrop of the night sky. Soon, the dragon reached the back of the palace, where Mt. Saurian was. He dove through the clouds, exposing them to the rain once more.

“Do you see it?” the Golden Dragon asked.

As Feilong responded with a nod, Angelina gaped at the scene unfolding below them. “It looks like a black dragon buried in the earth...” she mumbled.

A portion of the mountainside descending towards the palace appeared black and sooty. Furthermore, its tip was pointing directly towards the Guidepost

Tree.

“These are the remnants of the previous landslide,” the dragon explained.

His words caused Ryuho to shiver.

“A landslide really carried its debris this far?” Angelina muttered to herself. “And another one is going to happen soon? Is this my fault? Is it because I provoked the dragon’s wrath?”

Though the gossip she’d heard earlier still rang in her ears, part of her recognized their words as mere rumormongering. After all, this landslide had occurred in her first life. It couldn’t possibly be punishment for fabricating the Inverted Scale. Nevertheless, Angelia couldn’t shake off her unease. The black line in the earth looked like a dragon attempting to drive her away. Even in her first life, she’d felt like a blight in the palace.

“I should never have been born,” Angelina said, her lip trembling. “I killed Mudder.”

“Hell no!” Ryuho barked. “I don’t believe that for a second!”

Feilong bit his lip as well, averting his gaze. He’d been the one to make Angelina feel this way. “...I’m sorry,” he said awkwardly, unable to muster anything more. His chest ached as if struck with a blunt weapon.

“What’s this?” the Golden Dragon asked with a laugh. “You think one of my kin would be angry at someone who received my Inverted Scale? Absurd.”

A burst of wind gusted past them, blowing back Angelina’s pink hair and revealing her Inverted Scale. Feilong’s silver hair blew back as well, revealing his hidden left ear. The sight caused Angelina and Ryuho to gasp with surprise. Numerous scars laced the area around his scale as if he’d tried to rip it out countless times. Presently, Feilong was staring down at the aftermath of the previous landslide, burning the image into his mind’s eye. He didn’t realize that his hidden scars had been revealed.

“Do you know what you need to do, Whelp?” the dragon asked.

“Yes, and what about it, Lizard?” Feilong responded.

“You dare call me a lizard? Ah, well. If you know what you must do, I have no

complaints.”

Laughing cheerfully, the dragon circled around Mt. Saurian before returning to Celestial Axe Tower.



**KYRIL** and Junshi raced over to the emperor’s office. Following their arrival, Feilong—still rain-soaked—fired off orders. “We need to withdraw the barrier right away. This is a race against time. Kyril, you come with me.”

“Junshi, you take Princess Angelina to the bath,” Tomi added.

Junshi scooped up Angelina and left the tower, with Ryuho following.

“Let me down, Junshi!” Angelina cried.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t,” Junshi apologized. “We need to warm you up and change you into dry clothes.”

“But I can still help! I can’t leave now!”

“It’s already late in the evening. You need to rest, Princess. Leave the rest to us.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry,” Junshi interrupted. “The emperor and the crown prince will do everything in their power to prevent a disaster.”

“Please, Junshi, let me down.”

“Again—I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Ryuho barred Junshi’s path, his whiskers pointing straight forward. He unleashed a roar of hot wind at Junshi. To protect Angelina, Junshi turned his back on the Flame Tiger. As the smell of singed hair prickled everyone’s nostrils, Ryuho leapt towards Junshi to attack him.

“What’s going on, Ryuho?!” Junshi cried. “Why are you doing this?!”

Junshi panicked, which allowed Angelina to slip down from his arms. She hopped onto Ryuho’s back, and the Flame Tiger dashed away.

“Tell me where you want to go, Lina!” he shouted.

“The barrier between Mt. Saurian and the Big Dipper Garden!”

“Got it!”

They needed to undo the barrier’s magic as soon as possible. However, the sorcerers had gathered farther back since creating the new barrier was their top priority.

Amidst the rainy darkness, Ryuho dashed towards the end of the garden with Angelina clinging to his neck. He zipped past the Guidepost Tree, the storehouse, and finally the bamboo grove. Nothing resembling a wall stood at their destination. Instead, sorcerous tools had been buried in the ground at regular intervals, creating an invisible, magically powered barrier.

To destroy it, they would have to dig up the magical tools and render them powerless. However, if they dug normally, the tools would mark them as enemies and attack. Angelina stretched a timid hand towards the empty air, where she expected the barrier to be. Her fingers touched something. Though she couldn’t see it, there was almost certainly a wall there. With her fingers, she wrote magical script on this invisible wall.

A scattering of sparks crackled amidst the rain.

“Ouch!” Angelina squealed.

“Are you okay?!” Ryuho called out to her.

Wasting no time, Angelina blew on her burnt fingertips. “I had to be a bit aggressive, but I undid the barrier.”

Small columns of smoke were rising from the earth here and there. Those must have been the locations where the magical tools had been buried. Angelina dug beneath one column of smoke, and sure enough, she found a ceramic with the Tianshi’s Protective Seal etched upon its surface.

“Can you search for more of these, Ryuho?” she asked.

“You’ve got it!” the Flame Tiger responded.

He began digging beneath the columns of smoke amidst the darkness. Rain soaked his orange fur, and mud covered him up to his belly. A short distance

away, Angelina clawed at the dirt until her fingers bled.

Before long, Junshi finally caught up to them. He'd brought a handful of knights and sorcerers with him.

"What are you doing?!" he shouted.

"I'm trying to reconstruct the barrier," Angelina explained. "This way, it'll open in a fan shape from the center of the garden's north face."

"And what's the point of that?"

"It'll allow the garden to catch most of the debris!"

Angelina came up with this plan to reduce the damage as much as possible. After considering it for a moment, Junshi nodded. Originally, he'd planned to bring her back to the palace but changed his mind. After all, the girl was covered in mud, digging hard enough to break her nails, and she'd given directions in such a mature fashion.

"Knights, dig up the magical tools," Junshi ordered. "Sorcerers, reset the tools in a fan shape, opening up towards Mt. Saurian. Once all of them have been reset, erect a new barrier!"

Everyone began moving, allowing Angelina and Ryuho to continue their work. As soon as the barrier had been re-erected in a fan shape, the rain suddenly halted. A deathly silence fell over the area. When Angelina looked up at Mt. Saurian, she felt the ground writhing and slithering towards them.

"Run!" she squealed. "It's collapsing! The mountain's collapsing!"

"Retreat to the new northern barrier in front of the palace!" Junshi bellowed. "Help protect the barrier in case of an emergency!"

Everyone started sprinting at the same time. When Junshi tried to scoop up Angelina, Ryuho stole her from him.

"I'm faster!" the Flame Tiger shouted.

Small stones began rolling down the mountain. At the same time, the wind, smelling of grass and rain, blew down its heights like the breath of a stone dragon. Breaking branches echoed in the distance. Fallen leaves swirled around in the wind and rain, blowing towards them. As the rolling pebbles grew

increasingly large and plentiful, an uncanny sound echoed behind their backs.

Everyone dashed through the bamboo grove, the stalks screaming and breaking apart behind them. Though the debris increased in volume as it surged down the mountain, the bamboo still slowed it down. Even so, it was only a matter of time until the landslide tore down the grove entirely. They needed to escape as fast as possible.

When Angelina and Ryuho passed the storehouse, she reached out her arm and cried, “The wicker cabinet!”

“No, we won’t make it in time!” Ryuho shouted. “Plus, the cabinet won’t even move!”

“But—”

“Survival comes first!”

Angelina clenched her teeth. Abandoning the cabinet that had provided her with so much help caused her chest to constrict painfully. Ignoring her sorrow, Ryuho continued running. When they arrived before the Guidepost Tree, a cloud of dust reached their backs.

“We should be okay here, right?” Ryuho asked.

When he and Angelina turned around, a wave of mud entered their field of vision. Tragically, a group of sorcerers who’d been late running away were trailing behind them.

*They won’t make it in time!* Angelina screamed internally.

Thus, she folded her hands and prayed. “Please save them, Mishter Dragon!”

The seal on her right palm glowed, and light shone from her folded hands. Suddenly, the Golden Dragon appeared in the sky above the palace. As he soared towards them, the air rang out with an explosive sound. Within moments, his snout came to a stop in front of Angelina.

“You called for me, Princess Angelina?” he asked.

“The debris is about to crush those sorcerers, Mishter Dragon!”

In response to Angelina’s frantic cries, the Golden Dragon changed his



direction in a slithering motion. He then rested on his side between the sorcerers and the landslide. The debris crashed into his body, pushing him back inch by inch. Nevertheless, the debris slowed, and during this window of opportunity, the sorcerers crossed the Guidepost Tree.

The wave of debris pressed down on the Golden Dragon. Angelina's former home had gotten caught in the cascade, with the wicker cabinet protruding from the window. Finally, the dragon's back slammed against the Guidepost Tree. Still glowing, the tree's flowers fluttered to the ground. Meanwhile, the trunk let forth a disquieting creak. Caught between the tree and the debris, the Golden Dragon bent like a whip. However, as soon as the avalanche of earth and stone had passed his body, it stopped.

Silence fell over the garden, and no one moved as if time had stopped. Shortly after, the dragon squirmed his way out of the debris.

"It stopped..." Angelina mumbled.

"Indeed it did," the dragon replied, bringing his snout to her face.

Angelina hugged his snout and nuzzled her face against his. "Thank you so much!"

"If you're going to pet me, please do so between my horns," the dragon instructed. He shrank in size, lowering his head in front of Angelina in a pestering manner.

"Who's a good boy?" she cooed, rubbing him between the horns.

"Though your head pats feel most pleasant, this ordeal has been enough to tire even a dragon. Please allow me to rest for a short while."

After letting out a small yawn, the Golden Dragon flew back to the palace. A dragon-shaped indentation remained in the debris around the tree. While eyeing this, Junshi exhaled a long breath and patted Angelina on the head.

"Hey, who gave you permission to touch her?!" Ryuho barked.

Junshi smiled faintly. "You need to rest, too, Princess." He looked at Ryuho and continued, "I leave her in your capable hands."

"You don't have to tell me twice!" the Flame Tiger growled.

“The rest of us will return to the palace and await His Majesty’s orders,” Junshi finished.

With that, he led the knights and sorcerers away from the garden. Once they were gone, Angelina clambered up the debris. The flattened storehouse had washed up right in front of her. During her previous lives, this ramshackle building had been teeming with sad, lonely, and bitter memories. In this life, however, it had become the only place she and Ryuho could relax together. At first, the loss of her former home stunned Angelina into silence, but soon enough, she remembered something.

*I was protected from this disaster in my first life because I lived in the Big Dipper Garden. Even though the emperor abandoned me, why did he never go so far as to exile me? Why didn’t he kill me? Why was I imprisoned in this garden? I don’t have the answers to any of these questions...*

Though abandoned, she’d still been protected in some way. Seeing this truth with her own eyes confused her. While unable to collect her thoughts, her desire to save the wicker cabinet still propelled her forward. She scrambled up the mountain of mud and approached the storehouse, where she could see the cabinet peeking out of the rubble.

“Lina!” Ryuho shouted.

“Maybe I can still save all its possessions!” she cried back.

Angelina dug around the wicker cabinet with her bare hands to extract its contents. Fine bits of rubble got caught in her small nails, stinging her hands. Ryuho stood beside her and dug as well. When they’d finally unearthed the wicker cabinet’s lock, Ryuho picked up a fallen Guidepost Tree branch in his mouth and handed it to Angelina. After using her clothes to wipe off the mud on it, she slotted it in next to the lock, as she always did. Immediately, the crushed branch glowed faintly.

“Exulted Guidepost Tree, please give unto me thy resplendent light once more.”

The branch radiated even more light as if wringing out its final luminescence. With a practiced hand, Angelina traced the Big Dipper constellation on the lock’s surface. At last, the cabinet unlocked, and Angelina threw the door open.

If she didn't hurry, water would flood the interior and soil the contents. In fact, the interior was already far more besmirched with mud than she'd anticipated.

"At the very least, maybe I can save the diary!" she cried.

Alas, the diary was a dirty, crumpled mess. Restoring it would probably be impossible. Angelina fell to her knees in a puddle of water. "I failed!"

She clutched the diary to her chest. As her tears fell upon the cover, the book transformed into a long-tailed tit and took flight. One by one, every item in the cabinet changed into a uniquely colored bird and fled into the sky.

"What...?" Angelina mumbled.

Only a magnificent green robe that appeared to be a wedding garment remained. Gold, silver, pearls, and mother-of-pearl inlay decorated the robe unsparingly. Likewise, a phoenix was embroidered onto the garment in golden thread.

As tears ran down Angelina's face, she picked up the robe. "I'm so sorry."

"You needn't cry," a voice echoed from the robe. It must have belonged to the princess once imprisoned in the storehouse. "I am the embodiment of regret," the voice continued. "I was waiting to be released from here."

"But—"

"I feared dying without anyone's knowledge. I couldn't allow the emotions burning in my heart to disappear. Yet because of those emotions, I was bound to this place. I expected to remain in this state forever—eternally alone and unnoticed. However, you read my diary." Here, the robe paused and fluttered into the air. "That was enough for me. I'm now ready to take my leave."

Angelina removed the wooden tag from her neck and held it out. "Take this with you, Princess."

"You may keep that for now," the robe replied. "I hope you find happiness, Angelina."

In the end, the wicker cabinet called Angelina by her name. The cabinet must have overheard her and Ryuho's conversations. After all, they'd spent countless hours on the second floor of the storehouse.

With a single flap of its sleeves, the robe transformed into the phoenix once embroidered on its fabric. The phoenix then soared skyward.

Due to the shock of losing something dear to her, the energy drained from Angelina's body. While still holding onto the wooden tag, she collapsed into a puddle of water. Ryuho darted over to her side and licked her face.

"Hey, Lina!" he shouted.

When Angelina didn't respond, Ryuho grabbed her by the collar with his mouth. A shiver ran down his spine. She seemed half dead, her body limp and sapped of strength. Wasting no time, he carried her over to the base of the Guidepost Tree. Thanks to the tree's canopy, the ground here was much drier than the surrounding area. Additionally, it was quite elevated due to the tree roots.

Ryuho barked at the ground, expelling hot wind and warming up a patch of earth. After laying Angelina down there, he whined softly at her. His gentle voice turned into a warm wind that enveloped her body and staved off her chills. Next, Ryuho wrapped himself in a circle around her. Once situated, he licked her to clean and warm her entire body. Wherever Ryuho came into contact with Angelina, he felt chilled as well. Thus, he used his Flame Tiger powers to raise his own temperature. His orange fur stood up and sparkled as if on fire.

"Lina!" he called out to her in a whine.

When she didn't respond, Ryuho slapped her with his tail. Angelina remained motionless, her body still chilled to the bone. At this point, her freezing body steadily drained Ryuho of warmth.

"Lina, Lina!" he continued to shout.

Lina was incredibly small. Did human children really suffer this much simply from catching a chill in the rain? Ryuho hadn't known the extent of their frailty.

*She was desperate to stop the landslide, he thought. And I expected everything to work out if I helped her do that. Did I end up hurting her instead?*

Pangs of regret shot through Ryuho. He should have let Angelina rest, as Tomi had suggested.

“Lina, Lina, Lina!”

No matter how many times Ryuho called her, she didn’t respond.

*She’s pretty resilient to pain, isn’t she? I’ve never heard her complain about the cold or anything else hurting her!*

Ryuho peered at Angelina through the wooden tag still gripped in her hand. Through this magical window, she appeared as her past self on the day they’d met. No one would suspect her of being a princess in those shabby clothes. On top of unkempt hair, she also had callused fingertips and hangnails. Worst of all, her limbs were terribly emaciated.

*No, she couldn’t say anything in the first place, Ryuho realized. Lina is numb to pain. I’m the idiot for not realizing that sooner!*

“I can’t call for help in this voice!” Ryuho shouted in his loudest bark. “I can’t save you, Lina!”

*If I can’t save Lina, I don’t need my Flame Tiger powers! I’ll give you all my heat, so don’t freeze to death—I’m begging you!*

Ryuho’s orange fur stood on end, puffing up into a large flame. Even so, this flame wouldn’t burn anything. Rather, its sole purpose was to warm Angelina.

“Someone! Anyone! Please save Lina!”

Ryuho’s sorrowful cries transformed him into a human. As Angelina’s eyelids cracked open ever so slightly, he peered down at her face.

A boy appeared in Angelina’s vision. His short, red hair—reminiscent of fire—stuck out in every direction, refusing to be tamed. An unyielding spirit shone from his red and gold eyes—the same color as Ryuho’s. His golden earrings were the same as Ryuho’s as well. He wore puffy Nanranese trousers and had a cloth wrapped around his waist. To finish the ensemble, he wore a short vest directly against his skin.

“Ryuho...?” Angelina asked in a hoarse voice.

The boy nodded slightly.

Having heard Ryuho’s cries, Feilong raced over to the Guidepost Tree. He glared at the young boy holding his beloved daughter.

“Please save Lina,” Ryuho pleaded in a tearful voice. “I hate you, but please save Lina!”

Wordlessly, Feilong took Angelina from the boy.

“Don’t be angry with Ryuho...” Angelina muttered before losing consciousness again.

After sparing Ryuho a glance, Feilong dashed away without saying anything.

While furiously chasing after Feilong, Ryuho grabbed the rain-soaked wooden tag from Angelina’s hand. His six-year-old legs were so slow. Still, no matter how far Feilong left him behind, he ran towards the North Star Sanctuary with all his might.

Unfortunately, the guard at the gate wouldn’t permit his entry. Even if he claimed to be Ryuho, no one believed him while in human form. For some reason, he’d become incapable of turning back into a Flame Tiger. This was the first time he’d turned into a human outside the night of a new moon. As a result, he had no idea how to control his transformations.

After being turned away, Ryuho considered returning to the Nanranese manor in the Canopy, where his sister lived. However, if he appeared there in human form, he would be forced to return to Nanran. Until now, Ryuho had been free to do as he pleased because he was a Flame Tiger cub. He would have much less leniency as a human.

For the time being, Ryuho waited among the refugee tents set up around Celestial Axe Tower. If he could speak to Kyril or Junshi, perhaps he could convince them of his identity.

This turned out to be a naïve hope.

When Yuen and Kyril visited the refugee tents, Ryuho tried calling out to them, but their personal guards stopped him. In the end, he wasn’t even allowed to speak to them.

A little while later, he spotted Junshi and tried to appeal to him, but ultimately, Junshi remained unconvinced. Ryuho looked like a dirty, impoverished six-year-old. Additionally, he had no way of proving his identity. No matter how many times he tried turning back into a Flame Tiger, his

attempts proved futile.

*I might have lost the ability to turn into a Flame Tiger forever.*

A chill ran down Ryuho's spine. Overcome with despair, he sat in one corner of a refugee tent and prayed for Angelina's safety.



**ANGELINA** woke up in a state of deep confusion. She didn't recognize the bed she was lying on. More concerningly, a man's muscular, completely bare chest filled her vision. When she timidly lifted her head, she found Feilong looking down at her.

*What are you trying to do? Give me a heart attack?!* she yelped internally.

"Are you awake?" Feilong asked.

Angelina nodded. Yet, upon finding something amiss, she panicked. The fluffy warmth that always filled her bed was gone.

*Ryuho's not here! Where did he go?*

When Angelina tried to push Feilong's bare chest away, he rested his hands on her shoulders.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"...T-To my own room," Angelina replied, flustered. Her voice was still hoarse.

"Is that so?" Feilong pressed, sounding slightly reproachful. "When have you ever used your own room?"

"...I meant Big Brudder's room," she amended.

"I won't allow it."

Feilong's curt tone brooked no argument.

"Um, please let go of me," Angelina said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"On the contrary, why do you *need* to leave?" Feilong asked.

The emperor's childish objection annoyed Angelina. "To look for Ryuho," she answered.

"You're not well enough to leave. You just slept for a whole day."

"I'm fine."

Feilong shook his head. "No, you're not fine."

"Yesh, I am!"

When Angelina lost her temper, the emperor could barely suppress a fond smile. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Is everyone else okay, too? What about the city?" she asked.

"Yes. Everything and everyone are okay."

Angelina breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness!"

"Yes, I'm quite thankful *you're* okay."

Feilong's voice sounded nasally, which startled Angelina. The emperor averted his gaze.

"Your Majeshty?" Angelina asked. When he didn't respond, she pressed, "Are you angry at me?"

"No, I'm not angry!" Feilong yelled, whipping around again. His eyes were watery and somewhat red. Likewise, the tip of his nose was faintly pink.

*Is he... crying?*

Angelina gaped. The cruel emperor who even inspired terror in fiends was crying for her sake? Ever so gently, she extended a hand towards his cheek. His bangs, which fell over the left side of his face, wavered like strands of gossamer.

Feilong smiled as if peace had settled over his heart. "Lina," he spoke her name in a sweet voice.

Angelina broke into a smile as well. Before, she hadn't been able to believe Feilong. To avoid being hurt, she hadn't expected anything of him in case he abandoned her again.

*Even so, he believed in me and rescued me. I want to believe in him, too.*



“...Fodder.”

“Lina.”

“Fodder.”

“Lina.”

As the two repeated each other's names, Feilong lovingly combed Angelina's hair with his hand. When Angelina patted his head in response, he grinned from ear to ear. “How long has it been since anyone patted my head?” he asked.

Phaenna had been the last one to do so.

“Do you like head pats too, Fodder?” Angelina asked.

She was thinking about Ryuho, who loved being rubbed behind the ears.

“Yes,” Feilong replied. “You like them too?”

“Yep, sure do.”

“In that case, have some more.”

And so Feilong continued patting Angelina's head. Not too long ago, she'd recoiled from his touch, expecting him to hit her. Now, she had complete faith in him. That warmed Feilong's heart, causing tears to spill from his eyes, which even he found strange.

*Did I not shed my last tears when Phaenna died?* he wondered.

His frozen heart was beginning to thaw. These tears were warm and pleasant.

“Um, Fodder, where's Ryuho?” Angelina asked.

“Are you that worried about him?”

“Uh-huh.”

Feilong sighed. “First, you need to have a doctor examine you.”

This time, Angelina obeyed him.

The doctor diagnosed Angelina with a cold and severe exhaustion from using too much magic in the rain. After feeding Angelina a light meal, Feilong put her in the bath. Throughout this, Angelina asked the palace ladies about Ryuho, but none had answers. That steadily fanned the flames of her unease.

*He's okay, right?* Angelina wondered. *Maybe he went back to his Nanranese master. But does his master know he can turn into a human? What if he's lost any place to go home to...?*

Angelina couldn't sit still for a moment longer. After changing into a new set of clothes, she made a break for it, planning to search for Ryuho herself. However, a palace lady caught her immediately. Apprehending a three-year-old child wasn't exactly difficult, after all.

"You still need to rest, Princess," the palace lady said.

"No, I'm going to look for Ryuho!"

"The manservants are out searching for him. Please return to your room."

"You don't understand!" Angelina cried. "Ryuho might be in trouble."

"Ryuho is strong enough to look after himself. He's a Flame Tiger, after all."

Angelina shook her head fervently.

*Ryuho isn't a Flame Tiger right now, she thought. I don't know why, but he took the form of a child. If he immediately turned back into a tiger, then he's probably okay. But if he's still a child, he might be in trouble. Should I tell anyone that he's no longer a tiger? I don't even know if this change is temporary. And if this is Ryuho's secret, I can't go spilling it either. There's so much I don't know right now.*

Angelina continued shaking her head and sobbing quietly. The palace ladies tried and failed to comfort her. In the end, they sought the help of Kyril, who attempted to console her next.

"Ryuho's gone," Angelina sobbed.

"There's no need to worry," Kyril assured her. "Everything is going to be okay."

"No, nothing's okay. Ryuho's gone."

Teardrops fell down Angelina's pink cheeks like gemstones. Kyril began to panic. It seemed like the blue sky in her eyes was melting.

"We're looking for Ryuho right now," he said.

“You won’t find him. I’m the only one who can find him.”

As Angelina continued sobbing, Kyril helplessly tried to come up with a solution.

“Ryuho’s gone,” Angelina repeated. “Let me go look for him, Big Brudder.”

Kyril scooped up Angelina in his arms. “All right—I’ll go look for him with you.”

Angelina nodded. “Thanks, Big Brudder,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck.

In response, Kyril mussed her hair.

Along the way, the pair ran into Junshi.

“Where are you going, Prince Kyril?” Junshi asked.

“We’re looking for Ryuho,” Kyril replied. “Have you seen him?”

“He never came back after the landslide?”

Junshi had entrusted Angelina to Ryuho and left the Guidepost Tree. Afterward, the emperor himself apparently brought her back to the sanctuary. While this news had puzzled Junshi, he hadn’t looked into the matter amidst the frenzy of the landslide.

When Angelina sniffled loudly, Junshi racked his brain for some way to help her. “Oh!” he cried. “Come to think of it, a boy in one of the refugee tents mentioned Ryuho.”

Angelina couldn’t contain her excitement. “Let’s go!” she squealed.

Kyril and Junshi nodded to each other. Soon afterward, they headed towards the tents with guards in tow.

“Let me down, Big Brudder,” Angelina said.

Kyril obliged, setting her down on the ground. Two campaign tents were in front of the Celestial Axe Tower. Both were overflowing with refugees following the knights’ orders to take shelter there. Once inside the first tent, Angelina observed the crowd closely while wading through the sea of people, desperate to find Ryuho.

In human form, Ryuho looked like a boy around six. His red hair had been

reminiscent of flames. He'd been wearing Nanranese clothes and gold earrings. Most strikingly, the red and gold of his beautiful eyes reminded her of a sunset.

Ultimately, they didn't find Ryuho in the first tent. As such, the group hurried to the second tent and waded through the crowd there.

*No, no, no. Ryuho's not here! Don't tell me... When the worst possible scenario crossed Angelina's mind, she shook her head fervently. It's okay! Ryuho's strong! He even promised to protect me!*

Angelina jerked her head up to prevent herself from crying. Suddenly, a sight in the distance caught her full attention. With a gasp, she ran in a straight line.

"Lina!" Kyril called out to her.

She didn't turn around. Without stopping, she weaved through the crowd, dashing towards Ryuho. "Found you!" she cried, diving forward and embracing him.

Ryuho couldn't decide how to react. This pristine princess threw her arms around him despite how dirty he was. Unsure of himself, he stood stock still, his arms outstretched.

"I'm going to get you dirty, Lina..." he mumbled.

"Then I don't need clean clothes," she responded. "I can wear my old ones."

Upon hearing this, Ryuho felt like his nonexistent tail stood straight up. Throwing off reserve, he squeezed Angelina into his arms.

As her chest swelled with happiness, Angelina leaned over to whisper in his ear. "May I call you Ryuho?"

"Yeah! But how did you know it was me?"

"How could you be anyone else? Your eyes and voice are exactly the same."

The boy's face scrunched into a smile. No matter how many times he'd claimed to be Ryuho, no one had believed him. Yet, in the end, Angelina had found him.

Kyril and Junshi raced over to Angelina. From their perspective, the princess was hugging a strange boy covered in mud.

“Lina!” Kyril shouted a remonstrance.

When Angelina turned around, however, she was positively beaming. “I found Ryuho!”

In response to her overwhelming joy, Kyril’s anger dissipated, and he couldn’t help but smile at her. On the other hand, Junshi merely gaped at Ryuho. This boy claimed to be Ryuho the other day.

“...So, you really were Ryuho,” Junshi mumbled.

“Pretty hard to believe, huh?” the boy responded in a self-deprecating tone.

While Angelina remained glued to Ryuho, Kyril spoke up. “We can think about what to do next later. For now, would you come back to the North Star Sanctuary with us, Ryuho?”

Ryuho nodded.

“He needs food and a bath,” Angelina noted.

Kyril smiled. “Indeed, he does.”

“Whoops, I forgot—don’t you hate baths?” Angelina asked.

Ryuho harrumphed. “I-I can handle a bath!”

Upon arriving at the sanctuary, everyone treated Ryuho with the utmost courtesy as Angelina’s savior. A servant led him into a guest room, where he took a bath to clean the mud from his body. Afterward, he changed into the brand-new outfit provided for him and sat quietly in a chair. He felt somewhat on edge, partly because he wasn’t accustomed to wearing Jinlongian clothes. Yet, more importantly, he lacked confidence in his new reflection.

*Lina said I was cool as a Flame Tiger, he thought. Will I be able to turn back into one? I never studied this seriously, so I have no idea. Based on what Shua told me, we can’t go back after making our choice, right?*

Ryuho stared down at his small hands and sighed. Back in the tent, their reunion overjoyed Angelina, but before long, she might be disappointed. Now, Ryuho was a six-year-old boy like any other. As a small and powerless human child, he couldn’t protect her like Kyril or Junshi.

*Ah, damn it, I wanna run away! But if I run away, I won't be able to see Angelina ever again! More importantly, is the emperor gonna execute me for disrespecting him? That's entirely possible, right? And if that happens, will Nanran even be able to say anything?*

If Ryuho were still a Flame Tiger, he would have licked himself to calm his nerves. Yet now, he had no idea how to soothe himself. After gazing outside through the window, he looked down at the floor his feet didn't reach while sitting in a chair.

*I bet Angelina's gonna end up hating me 'cause I'm so lame...*

Suppressing the urge to cry, Ryuho hugged his knees atop the chair. At that moment, the door opened, and a squealing Angelina burst into the room. As soon as Ryuho saw her smiling face, round tiger ears—black and spotted white—popped out of his hair. Without thinking, Ryuho jumped from the chair and raced to her.

When Angelina threw her arms around him, Ryuho caught her. As they twirled around, laughing delightedly, Angelina's skirt fanned out like a flower. Apparently, she'd changed as well.







*Just being with Lina makes me smile!*

Ryuho's previous desire to cry now seemed ridiculous. Angelina's mere presence was magical.

"Ryuho, your ears!" she cried.

Ryuho pressed down on his head and gasped. *Am I not completely human yet?* he wondered, breathing a small sigh of relief.

"Oh yeah," Ryuho said, handing over the wooden tag Angelina had dropped. "Here you go."

Smiling gleefully, Angelina took the wooden tag with both hands and pressed it against her small chest. "Thank you!"

Ryuho chuckled bashfully. *Being able to return this to Lina is already more than I could've hoped for.*

Steeling himself, Ryuho looked behind Angelina. Emperor Feilong and Prince Kyril both stood there, their faces masks of displeasure. Tomi was present as well. A spike of anxiety shot through Ryuho, and he stood straight up, his ears folding backward. At the very least, Mion's absence was a good sign.

When the boy introduced himself as Ryuho, Feilong and the others were suspicious at first. However, after seeing him grow those round ears, they had to admit the truth—this boy was the Flame Tiger. Holy beasts were probably capable of assuming human forms.

"First of all, I should thank you for saving Angelina," Feilong said. Yet, contrary to his words, his displeased tone matched his expression.

"I didn't save her for your sake, old man!" Ryuho shouted reflexively. At that moment, he realized his own audacity and stiffened. "Excuse me. I, um... did not save her for your sake, Your Majesty."

While Feilong grimaced, Tomi let out a snort of laughter. Afterward, Tomi bent down to address Ryuho at eye level. "May I ask about your family?"

Ryuho whipped his head to the side. "I'm here alone. If you're going to punish someone, just punish me."

“I’m not angry,” Tomi replied with a smile. “You’re Princess Angelina’s savior, and we know how you’ve protected her all this time. We wish to give our thanks.”

Ryuhō timidly glanced at Angelina.

“It’s okay,” she prompted, still holding onto Ryuhō as if to shield him. “This time, I’ll be the one doing the protecting. You’ve protected me since we lived in the garden, so it’s only fair, right?”

Angelina’s words were a knife through Feilong’s heart. A small arrow pierced Kyril’s chest as well.

“You really won’t cause any trouble for my family?” Ryuhō asked.

“No, we won’t,” Tomi replied. “I promise this as Jinlong’s prime minister.”

Ryuhō let out a breath. “In that case, my name is Ryuhō Ruo.”

In response to this offhand introduction, Tomi practically staggered to one knee. “...You’re the third prince of Nanran?”

Kyril also regarded Ryuhō with wide eyes.

“I still won’t give you Lina,” Feilong muttered under his breath, “regardless of whether you’re a prince.”

Tomi got down on his other knee. “Princess Shua of Nanran is living in the Canopy as a hostage, is she not?”

“Shua took my older brother’s place as a hostage,” Ryuhō answered. “I decided to rescue her if she was being bullied.”

Feilong laughed. “Nanran attempting to set a Flame Tiger on me would have been quite amusing.”

“Be quiet, Fodder,” Angelina snapped.

Her cold tone caused him to fall silent.

“But when I got here, that wasn’t the case,” Ryuhō continued. “Since Shua seemed to be having a good time, I got bored and went exploring. That’s when I got caught in a trap.”

“A trap?” Tomi repeated.

“There were tiger traps in the Big Dipper Garden’s bamboo grove. They were even enchanted.”

Tomi frowned. Recently, Mion *had* claimed to have found and disposed of tiger traps. Still, she’d found those traps because Ryuho had been caught in one? That could turn into quite a headache for Jinlong.

“So anyway, Lina saved me from the trap, and we’ve been together ever since,” Ryuho finished.

“In other words, Ryuho never did anything wrong!” Angelina insisted. “If you kick him out of the palace, I’m leaving too!”

“Lina!” Kyril cried out, panic getting the better of him. “We’re not trying to kick Ryuho out of the palace, but he needs to return to his proper home.”

“I got a letter saying he could stay with me! Ryuho even brought his own money for food. I never paid for his meals.”

Certainly, Kyril had received gold coins from Ryuho. Though the prince hadn’t used them, he’d still accepted them. Baffled, Kyril looked at Tomi for a solution. At this point, he probably couldn’t count on Feilong.

“I see,” Tomi said. “In that case, I’ll need to have a conversation with Nanran.”

Angelina looked at the prime minister anxiously. “To kick Ryuho out?”

“Most certainly not. However, does Princess Shua know what’s become of you, Prince Ryuho?”

Ryuho shook his head back and forth.

“Then why don’t we explain the situation to Nanran and work out the formalities?” Tomi suggested. “Afterwards, Ryuho should be able to join you again, Princess.”

“Formalities?” Angelina repeated.

“Yes. We’ll have Prince Ryuho of Nanran officially recognized as your playmate.”

“What?!” Feilong shouted, glaring at Tomi.

In turn, Kyril glared at the emperor. “Father, if we’re not careful, Angelina

might end up eloping to Nanran. Perhaps we should compromise here, no?"

"I'll burn that little tiger boy to a crisp..." Feilong muttered.

Angelina narrowed her eyes at the emperor. "I hate you, Fodder."

"I was just kidding," Feilong said, turning away sulkily. "Send a messenger to the Nanranese manor. Once the prince has been returned there for a short while, we'll issue another directive saying—"

"Fodder!" Angelina cried.

"—please become my daughter's friend," Feilong finished.

Angelina and Ryuho took each other's hands, squealing with delight. At that moment, a tail grew from Ryuho's lower back and stood straight up.

"Did you hear that?!" he cheered. "We can be friends!"

While Feilong observed this scene with displeasure, Kyril smiled stiffly.

## Chapter 9: The Trial of the Named Princess

**FEILONG** sat in his office chair with a scowl and Angelina resting on his lap. To protect her, he'd kept her close until Ryuho returned to the sanctuary. Though Feilong hated to admit it, Ryuho was the perfect guard for her.

Yuen stood behind Feilong. His presence caused Angelina's heart to race with anxiety. She'd first seen Yuen in this very office when she warned everyone about the landslide. Back then, she didn't know his identity. Upon being introduced to him later, however, she'd been overcome with shock.

After all, Yuen was the future ringleader of the coup.

Though Angelina had never seen his face, she did know his name. During the first loop, when she'd lived in the lower city, Yuen had usurped the throne.

*Yet, right now, he's still Father's right-hand man, Angelina thought. Speaking of which, Junshi betrayed Kyril, too. I suppose I ought to feel a little sorry for my family, huh?*

When Angelina glanced at Yuen, he smiled at her ever so slightly.

*Why did he betray Father? He doesn't seem like a bad person. Well, the emperor is cruel, so I guess it's understandable why someone would want to betray him.*

After reaching this conclusion, Angelina nodded to herself.

Several daoshi stood before Feilong. Daoshi preached the doctrine of the Heavenly Sovereign Temple. As the empire's most revered monks, they performed divine rituals in the mausoleums, which were religious facilities within Jinlong.

Stone-faced, Mion stood behind the daoshi. Meanwhile, the monks regarded Angelina with looks of displeasure. Upon seeing their expressions, Angelina remembered the rumors she'd overheard in the storehouse.

*Some people don't like how much Father is doting on me.* Angelina tried to

climb down from Feilong's lap, but he wouldn't allow it. *Read the room, Dad!*

"Your Majesty," one of the frowning daoshi appealed to Feilong. "According to our doctrine, a girl yet to undergo the Naming Trial cannot be recognized as a princess."

The daoshi conducted the Naming Trial in the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum. As the empire's oldest mausoleum, it was in the palace. In short, one required the intervention of the temple to be recognized as royalty. However, Angelina had skipped this formality, which displeased the daoshi.

The monks viewed Feilong as a threat. They interpreted his actions as a slight against their faith. Moreover, they didn't think well of a usurper who'd committed patricide to claim the throne. Seeing as Feilong hadn't feared his sovereign father, might he turn his wrath upon God next?

Personally, Feilong didn't believe in the temple's doctrine. However, he didn't want to make an enemy of those whom the public revered. Thus, he hadn't interfered with the daoshi, but in all honesty, he found this whole affair quite bothersome.

*Perhaps I should take this opportunity to stamp out the temple,* Feilong considered.

As this violent thought crossed his mind, Angelia spoke up.

"I shall undergo the trial," she said in a dignified manner not befitting a three-year-old. "That will satisfy everyone, will it not?"

The daoshi gaped at her.

During the Naming Trial, the child would face challenges to test their aptitude as royalty. For a normal five-year-old, this would be difficult, but a potential emperor or empress needed to learn how to overcome these challenges. Had their education been sufficient, or did they still have more to learn? The trial would answer that question.

Mion smiled sinisterly. Angelina would have no hope of passing the trial. Apart from the daoshi, only Mion knew the princess's version of the trial, and she had no intention of teaching it to Angelina.

Feilong and Kyril had taken the test as princes and thus didn't know the sequence required for princesses. As a Yulan, Marfa wasn't familiar with Jinlongian customs. During Angelina's first life, Marfa mistakenly taught her the sequence she'd learned during Kyril's trial. As a result, Angelina hadn't been recognized as royalty.

Regardless, Angelina bowed her head to Feilong. "I humbly request your permission, Your Majesty."

Feilong believed in his daughter, for she possessed a strange power. Undoubtedly, she would be able to overcome the trial.

"Understood," he said. "You may undergo the trial."

"You believe in me?" Angelina asked.

"You're my daughter. You won't fail."

*And if she isn't recognized as a princess, I'll abolish the temple,* Feilong decided.

He donned a disquieting smile. The eerie sight sent a shiver down Angelina's spine.



**ON** the day of the trial, Angelina was given a prayer bracelet with five transparent beads. She'd received this same bracelet in her first life. After the trial, the beads had turned pitch black, indicating her failure.

The walls of the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum's first floor depicted four divinities. Likewise, the stars of the northern sky were on the ceiling. A spiral staircase leading downward occupied the center of the floor. Usually, a magnificent covering and fence barred access to these stairs. Today, however, the daoshi had removed the covering and were waiting by the staircase.

Angelina began descending the stairs to the basement. From here on out, she would face the trial alone. She wore the traditional white robes of the Jinlong Empire. To complete it, the wicker cabinet's wooden tag hung around her neck. Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, she found a statue of the Golden Dragon standing in the gloom. As a show of respect, she bowed to it.

“Why did you come here, Angelina?” the dragon asked. “Are you dissatisfied with the Inverted Scale I gave you?”

“Of course not,” Angelina replied. “But apparently, the daoshi aren’t convinced.”

The dragon snorted derisively. “Those who can’t hear my voice aren’t true daoshi. Regardless, I must confess some curiosity. Allow me to observe what you’re capable of.” Having said this, he wrapped himself around Angelina’s body in a slithering motion. “Don’t expect my help, though.”

In response to his challenge, Angelina merely nodded. “No need to worry about me. I studied for this.”

A satisfied chuckle echoed from the back of the dragon’s throat.

Angelina took a step forward. There was a wall behind the statue of the Golden Dragon, and the corridor split off to the left and right. Choosing which path to follow was the first trial.

*Good thing I read that book from the wicker cabinet.*

Angelina’s first gift from the wicker cabinet was the book on military and court etiquette. This tome contained detailed descriptions of ancient customs only passed down through the Jinlongian royal family. After leaving the garden, she kept it with her in the palace. Following the landslide, it remained in her room without turning into a bird.

The Naming Trial wouldn’t prove difficult for an adult. You circled around the underground corridors of the mausoleum in a fixed order. Along the way, you offered the corresponding stones to the four divinities in each cardinal direction. That said, the corridors were dark, with staircases and waterways built into them. Walking these paths alone would frighten the average five-year-old. This trial tested whether one could suppress their fear through rationality and execute the correct sequence of events.

Angelina turned down the right-hand corridor—the opposite of what she’d chosen in her first life. She continued down the gloomy path and found a realistic bust of a White Tiger protruding from the left-hand wall. As one of the four divinities, it bore its fangs at her.



Ahead of her, the corridor continued onward. This was the second test. If she was too scared, she could turn back and abstain from the rest of the trial. But, of course, she wouldn't be recognized as royalty in that case.

From the many stones at her feet, Angelina picked up the white one and placed it in the tiger's mouth.

*Is Ryuho doing okay?* she wondered.

Without too much consideration, Angelina patted the tiger's head. When she did so, the bust writhed and let out a roar. A moment later, the entrance to a cave opened in the wall.

The actual White Tiger stood within its depths.

Angelina held her breath. One path led into a gloomy cave with a sleeping White Tiger. The other path was a normal corridor.

*What in the world?! This is different from what I read in the book!*

Unsure which path to choose, Angelina looked at the Golden Dragon. He merely grinned back at her.

*This must be a test separate from the normal trial. In that case, into the tiger's den! Nothing ventured, nothing gained!*

Angelina entered the cave. With each step, fallen leaves crunched beneath her feet, and bull-headed shrikes cried out shrilly to mark their territory. All the while, the Golden Dragon said nothing. Considering how much time Angelina had spent with Ryuho, however, she wasn't terribly frightened of tigers. Thus, she came to a bold stop in front of the creature.

"May I pass through here?" she asked.

The White Tiger opened his eyes and observed Angelina intently. "What is your name?" he asked.

"Angelina."

When she responded without fear, the White Tiger regarded her fondly. "You may pass."

Having received the White Tiger's permission, Angelina walked past him. Yet

suddenly, she turned around.

*I-I want to pet him,* she thought, itching to run her fingers through his fluffiness. *Would that be inappropriate during the trial?*

Regardless, she chanced a look at the White Tiger, who stared back at her. He even seemed to be in a good mood. Based on her experience, such cats were safe to pet.

“What’s wrong?” the tiger asked.

Angelina squared her shoulders. “Um, may I please pet you?”

The Golden Dragon let out a snort of laughter. When Angelina looked at him with surprise, he averted his gaze.

The White Tiger regarded Angelina fondly. Until now, test takers had always slipped past him as if fleeing from a monster, crying and trembling with fear. As such, he found the girl’s unusual behavior amusing.

“If you feel confident in yourself, you may pet me,” he allowed. “I give you special permission to do so.”

“Thanks!”

Angelina dashed over to the White Tiger. Given how much Ryuho had praised her head-patting abilities, she had confidence in herself. First, she removed the prayer bracelet from her wrist and placed it around her ankle. Getting the beads caught in the tiger’s fur would make her feel terrible.

“I’m going to shtroke your back now.”

Though Angelina slurred due to nervousness, she slowly rubbed the tiger’s back with her palm.

“Your hand is quite small,” the tiger noted.

*He is a lot bigger than Ryuho,* Angelina thought. *It’s hard to rub his whole back.*

“May I pet your head, too?” she asked.

“Please do.”

With his permission, Angelina stroked the White Tiger around his ears.

Afterward, she rubbed his forehead and the area around his whiskers.

“You carry the scent of a Flame Tiger on you,” he said.

Angelina nodded. “My best friend is one.”

“Truly? You have a Flame Tiger for a friend?”

The White Tiger stopped purring to let forth a loud, blissful yawn. His large, bright red mouth could have swallowed Angelina whole. Nevertheless, she hugged him around the neck, his rumbling purr echoing against her body.

*Nothing beats fluffiness for calming nerves,* she thought.

When Angelina let out a sigh of relief, the White Tiger licked her face. “That was a splendid massage. Your next trial is the Vermillion Bird.”

Following the tiger’s gaze, Angelina spotted a red-colored section of the cave wall. After saying her thanks, she headed over there. Grooves for climbing had been dug into this section. Presumably, the handholds were created for a five-year-old. As a result, the space between them was wide and somewhat difficult for Angelina to climb. Even so, she forced her way up them. As light from the outside grew increasingly visible, she spotted a circular hole in the ceiling. After popping her head through it, she found a grassy plain unfolding around her.

“Finally, some fresh air!” she exclaimed.

As the dry wind rustled the summer grass, Angelina sighed deeply. The birdsong of lesser cuckoos resounded across the plain, and the Golden Dragon circled around her. All the while, the massive Vermillion Bird circled the sky far above them.

Angelina’s eyes widened. She recalled the phoenix that had flown out of the wicker cabinet. Released from its regrets, was that phoenix now freely soaring in the heavens as well?

*Still, something seems off about the Vermillion Bird.*

“It seems to be looking for something,” Angelina muttered.

Looking around the plain, she found places here and there where the grass had been flattened. When she inspected the nearest location, she found a bird’s nest with several beautiful white eggs. Even more birds’ nests and eggs

were in the other locations. The eggs came in all different varieties, ranging from large to small and spotted to green.

“A lot of different birds live here, huh?”

Eventually, she found a remarkably large nest. However, it contained only a long, red feather and no eggs. This must have been the Vermillion Bird’s nest.

“Is she looking for her eggs?”

An animal trail formed a straight line from the nest. After following it, Angelina came upon an animal carcass resembling a wolf. The creature looked burned to death. A large, red egg—presumably the Vermillion Bird’s—lay next to it. Once she’d covered the creature with grass, Angelina touched the egg.

“Ouch!” she cried, for it was as hot as a boiled egg. “Is the chick going to be all right?”

Angelina removed one layer of her robes and inscribed magical script on the garment. It was an enchantment for fire prevention and heat resistance. Once the magic had taken effect, she wrapped the large, red egg in the garment and scooped it into her arms.

“It’s heavier than I expected.”

After heaving the egg back to its nest, she blew on her hands to cool them off. Despite the fire and heat-resistant magic, three-year-old children still had thin skin. Her palms had turned faintly red.

Suddenly, a tapping sound echoed from inside the egg.

“It’s about to hatch?!”

Angelina stared down at the egg. A small crack formed on its surface, and a beak poked out ever so slightly. Even so, the chick was a long way from breaking free.

“Come on! Keep going!”

As Angelina cheered it on, the egg split open, and a baby chick peeked its head out. Its eyes were pitch black, round, and adorable. At the same time, its skin was pink, and it hadn’t grown wings yet.

“Wait, will a baby chick this frail survive on its own?”

Angelina grew anxious. Another animal attacking this hatchling seemed all too likely.

“Where are your mommy and daddy?” she asked.

The chick cocked its head to one side and chirped as if to say, “You’re my mommy, right?”

Bewildered, Angelina pointed to herself. “Me?”

The chick nodded, and at that moment, the Vermillion Bird swooped down from the sky. To establish itself as the hatchling’s true mother, the great bird used its talons to grab Angelina by the collar and soared upwards.

“Huh?!” Angelina shouted. “Seriously?!”

While Angelina flailed, the Vermillion Bird regarded her from the corner of its eye. When the river came into view, the great bird let go of Angelina, causing her to plummet upside down towards the water’s surface.

“Aaaaah!”

Angelina splashed into the water. While coughing out gurgling breaths, she sank into the darkness. The river was so deep that she couldn’t see its bottom.

*Did I fail the third trial...?*

Still sinking, Angelina looked up at the water’s surface. Was this how she was going to die?

*Am I just going to die a violent death, no matter how many times I loop? In that case, I’d rather hurry up and disappear for good.*

This thought had plagued her countless times in the past. However, things were different now. Kyril, Feilong, and Ryuho all appeared in her mind’s eye. Through the water’s surface, she imagined the phoenix soaring across the sky. Meanwhile, the Golden Dragon remained wrapped around Angelina, though he showed no intention of helping her.

*I don’t want to die!*

Her back thudded against something. Startled, she turned around to find a

green gate. Desperate to survive, she pounded her fists against the gate, which opened automatically and allowed her to pass through. Once inside, she could breathe again, for there was no water in this space. Overcome with relief, Angelina filled her lungs with air. Only then did she realize that the pain in her reddened palms had disappeared.

A peacefulness reminiscent of spring filled the area. The scent of plum blossoms hung in the air, and the chirping of a bush warbler—its song still immature—reached Angelina’s ears.

A jar filled with freshly cooked rice stood on the ground, with a piece of paper attached to it. Unable to read the skilled calligraphy, Angelina peered at the writing through her wooden tag.

“Ferment,” she read aloud.

Angelina recalled a passage about a particular rice wine from the etiquette book. Priestesses fermented rice by chewing it and spitting it out. This wine would then be presented to ancient temples. Thus, Angelina took a bite of the rice, chewed it, and spat it back into the jar. She continued to do so until no rice was left unchewed, which hurt her mouth. Once finished, she reclosed the lid of the jar.

*Was that the answer?* she wondered. *It takes time for the rice to ferment and become alcohol, but maybe there was another way...?*

A spike of anxiety shot through Angelina. This had to be the fourth trial.

Suddenly, a Blue Dragon appeared and wrapped itself around the jar. The creature looked Angelina up and down. Upon seeing the Golden Dragon wrapped around her, the Blue Dragon blinked in surprise. Then, both dragons burst into simultaneous laughter.

“It’s been too long,” the Golden Dragon said.

“Indeed, it has,” the Blue Dragon agreed, handing a gourd filled with wine to his golden counterpart. “You may proceed to the final trial.”

A black gate appeared behind the Blue Dragon. After crossing through the gate, Angelina headed towards a small hill, which turned into a winding mountain path. A small, blue bird flew ahead of her, turned around, and

chirped. This male red-flanked bluetail appeared to be her guide. Thus, Angelina followed the bird, gasping for breath as she climbed the mountain path.

Finally, she reached the top of the hill. A Black Tortoise stood there, peering into a small lake with a tired expression.

“I dropped something precious in here,” the tortoise said. “Would you scoop it out for me?”

“What did you lose?” Angelina asked.

“That I do not know.”

A golden colander, golden chopsticks, and a golden ladle sat before the lake. When Angelina peered into the water, fragments of ice-like glittering stars appeared on its surface. Each fragment looked identical, and she had no idea which one was the precious item.

During the normal trial, she would have placed a black stone in the tortoise’s mouth in exchange for the Inverted Scale. However, because Angelina already possessed her scale, this trial called for a different solution.

“I’ve received some fine wine,” the Golden Dragon said. “Would you like a drink?”

“That would be most splendid,” the Black Tortoise replied.

After slithering away from Angelina, the dragon offered his wine to the tortoise in high spirits, and the two drank together.

*I need to think this through myself,* Angelina decided.

While staring at the lake’s surface, she realized something. Even when the water rippled, the fragments of ice didn’t move. Furthermore, she’d seen this unmoving placement of dots before.

*This is the same pattern as the wicker cabinet’s key. These are the stars of the northern sky!*

“May I ask one question?” Angelina ventured.

“By all means,” the tortoise replied.

“Did you only lose one precious thing?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

*The golden ladle represents the Big Dipper, Angelina concluded. If there’s only one precious thing, it must be the North Star.*

Angelina picked up the golden ladle and counted the ice fragments. Upon reaching the seventh fragment, she stared at the formation intently. Finally, she scooped out a single fragment and showed it to the tortoise. “Is this what you were looking for?” she asked.

The Black Tortoise answered with a satisfied nod. Then, the Golden Dragon shrank, wrapped itself around the ladle, and stopped moving. By all appearances, he had become the handle.

“Yes, this is it—the North Star,” the tortoise said. “I will give this to you instead of the Inverted Scale.”

A black lacquered door thudded to the ground in front of Angelina. When she opened the door, it connected to the mausoleum’s first floor, where a group of seated people were waiting for her return. Farther back, she saw a much plainer door made of wood. During her first life, Angelina had returned from that door.

Mion and the daoshi were staring at the wooden door. However, Feilong and the others were looking in Angelina’s direction.

“Angelina!” Feilong cried, rising to his feet.

As Mion turned around, her eyes widening, the daoshi whispered among themselves.

“This isn’t what the chief lady in waiting predicted,” one said.

When Angelina raised the golden ladle above her head, the ice fragment soared upward. A star chart had been engraved into the ceiling of the mausoleum, and the fragment fit into the North Star’s location.

As everyone gasped in amazement, a sagely looking daoshi with a long, white beard was the first to speak out. “When the emperor before last died, the North Star fell from the ceiling! Now, it has returned!”

“The previous emperor caused Jinlong’s guidepost to fall,” another daoshi



added. "Finally, it has been restored."

A third daoshi nodded. "Clearly, the Four Divinities have recognized the current emperor's reign."

The monks gathered around Angelina.

"This is the birth of Princess Angelina!" the sagely daoshi cheered. "She has cleared the trial and returned with the North Star!"

"No!" Mion shrieked. "The trial and the star are different matters!"

"That's quite enough, chief lady in waiting," Tomi admonished her.

"I disagree! Why is she carrying a golden ladle? Why isn't she wearing the proper robes? Why is her whole dress wet instead of just the hem?!"

Mion fired off questions in rapid succession. Partway through the normal test, the child would have to cross a waterway, which would cause their feet to get wet.

"She's not even wearing the prayer bracelet around her wrist!" Mion shrieked. "This is proof that she cheated!"

The daoshi regarded Angelina with suspicion. Thus, she removed the prayer bracelet from her ankle and showed it to the monks. All five beads were radiating light.

"The beads are the correct color, but for some reason, I can see the Four Divinities within them..." one of the daoshi mumbled. "Has anyone else ever witnessed anything so curious?"

At that moment, the handle of the ladle writhed. The Golden Dragon grew in size and wrapped himself around Angelina once more. "Those who cannot interpret the will of the Four Divinities are not fit to call themselves daoshi," he intoned.

The monks simultaneously fell to their knees. Overcome with shock, Mion stumbled backward.

"Angelina has heard my voice and returned the North Star," the Golden Dragon declared solemnly. "In the name of the Four Divinities and my own, I recognize Angelina as the Polaris Princess!"

Mion fell to her knees. Angelina hadn't simply been acknowledged as a princess. No, she'd been named the *Polaris Princess*.

"The Polaris Princess..."

When a monk mumbled these words, the Golden Dragon nodded coolly. The Polaris Princess was a messenger of the divine.

"The Polaris Princess receiving the Inverted Scale before her trial wouldn't be the least bit strange," the sagely daoshi muttered. He nodded to Angelina. "Polaris Princess Angelina, we daoshi shall serve your holy will."

This sudden turn of events had flustered Angelina. Feilong scooped her up in his arms and silently looked down on Mion. The deadly pressure emanating from his eyes caused her hair to stand on end.

*I'm going to be punished for disrespect, aren't I...? Mion thought. Still, I can accept being executed by the emperor's own hand.*

After exhaling softly, Mion knelt before the emperor. She exposed the white nape of her neck and pressed her forehead against the floor, fully prepared for a beheading.

Feilong's hand went to his sword. With a clink, he withdrew the blade to a mere fingertip's length, the naked steel reflecting light dully. This sword had shed rivers of blood. What was one more life? Yet, at that moment, Angelina's charm brushed against his fingertips. Feilong gasped. While cradled in the crook of his left arm, Angelina looked up at him anxiously. Her unclouded, azure eyes reminded him of Phaenna. Likewise, a rainbow luster identical to Kyril's sparkled within their depths.

*I don't want to see this child sullied with blood,* he thought, sheathing his sword. He cradled Angelina in his arms to calm her down.

"I'll issue your verdict later," Feilong said.

Following this short pronouncement, he left the mausoleum with Angelina in his arms.



**SHORTLY** after, Kyril and Junshi exposed Mion's crimes against Angelina. As a

result, she was removed from her post as chief lady in waiting and branded as a criminal. Branded individuals were forbidden from attending functions or entering places associated with the royal family. Furthermore, an enchantment on the brand sometimes caused recurring pain. Thus, the person would never forget their crimes.

Later, Tomi personally escorted Mion to Nanran to apologize for hurting Ryuho. The Lang family even paid an enormous consolation fee.

In the end, Mion was ordered to return to Tongfeng—her family’s territory. She only escaped greater punishment thanks to Angelina’s recommendation.

In his fury, Feilong had wanted to condemn the entire Lang family. However, Angelina prevented him from doing so. In the past, Feilong punished a great many nobles and bureaucrats. Because of this, he suffered from a constant lack of competent retainers. No one was capable of replacing Junshi, Tomi, Yuen, and all the others.

Also, in Angelina’s first life, the Lang family betrayed Feilong, leading a rebellion against him. What if their clan became embittered and helmed another coup? That would be disastrous. And so, with this in mind, Angelina asked Feilong to show mercy.



**ON** the day of Mion’s departure to her homeland, Angelina visited her one final time. Upon hearing about Mion’s brand, Angelina felt compassion for her. Certainly, Mion had abused her in a number of ways. During her first life, Angelina endured all manner of cruelties. Regardless, the current Mion wasn’t guilty of the abuse she’d committed during Angelina’s first life.

Similarly, Angelina held no grudge against Feilong or Kyril. In this loop, she’d finally met both of them and received their love. Thus, she didn’t regard their personalities from past and present lives in the same light.

Angelina had considered erasing Mion’s pain with her healing magic. To her surprise, Mion refused this offer, her expression one of incomprehension. “If I had done to the empress what I did to you, I wouldn’t have gotten off so easily,” she said.

“Fodder’s changed,” Angelina replied.

Mion gasped and clapped her hand over her mouth. She regarded Angelina intently, her black eyes wavering. She no longer wore her overly beautiful, deceitful smile.

“The emperor has changed...” she repeated.

Indeed, the old Feilong probably would have beheaded Mion in the mausoleum. In the worst-case scenario, he might have executed the entire Lang clan. He’d been that fierce of an emperor.

The threat of having his wife stolen from him had spurred Feilong to usurp the throne. Back then, he’d been as fierce, terrifying, and beautiful as lightning. Yet after Phaenna’s death, he’d lost his will to live. His ruthlessness had intensified, and like a star in the distant night sky, he’d seemed removed from earthly existence.

*Yet now he’s become a father,* Mion thought.

She hadn’t wanted to see Feilong doting on Angelina. She’d considered this sad and shameful, fearing it would sully the emperor’s dignity.

*Still, becoming emperor was never what he truly desired, was it?*

A drop of something rolled down Mion’s cheek.

“Princess Angelina,” Mion said, bowing her head deeply as she regarded the girl with sincerity. “I beg of you to please support Emperor Feilong.”

“There’s so much I want to learn from you,” Angelina replied.

“Why? I was so cruel to you.”

Angelina pursed her lips. “But no one knows more about the inner court than you.”

She spoke these words as if they were completely natural. At that moment, realization dawned on Mion. She’d never truly wanted to be the empress. Rather, she’d simply wanted the emperor to acknowledge her as essential to the inner court, just as Ryoui—her beloved aunt—had been.

*When did I forget that?* Mion wondered. *And why is this child being so kind to*

me?

Her chest tightened painfully, for she'd finally received the words she'd so desired. It felt as though a malignant spirit had been cast out of her.

*This child truly is the Polaris Princess.*

"If you run into any trouble, please send me a letter," Mion said.

"Are you sure?" Angelina asked.

"No matter where I am, I will always be a loyal servant of Jinlong."

An unaffected, somewhat bashful smile appeared on Mion's lips. Angelina felt a pang of sadness, for it was more beautiful than any smile she'd ever seen on the woman's lips throughout all her lives.

## Chapter 10: The Named Princess and Her Father

A short distance from the Big Dipper Garden's Guidepost Tree, Feilong surreptitiously watched his children.

Following the landslide, nature reclaimed the area from the Guidepost Tree to the side of Mt. Saurian. A small embankment in the shape of the Golden Dragon remained where he'd staved off the debris. The magical barrier had been reestablished around there, making it the garden's new boundary. People had been forbidden from living any closer to the mountainside, and a tree-planting project had begun there. Even though the remains of the storehouse had been removed, the garden was still dear to Angelina's heart.

The Golden Dragon had wrapped himself around the Guidepost Tree. Though light crimson swallowtail butterflies were resting on his horns, he paid them no mind.

Kyril sat inside the dragon's coil with Angelina in his lap. Ryuho also slept by Angelina's side in his Flame Tiger form. For a short while, he'd thought himself incapable of turning back into a tiger. After reuniting with Angelina, however, his mindset had stabilized, and he'd successfully reassumed his feline form. He still had plenty of time to choose between being a human or a tiger.

Ryuho's forepaws kneaded Angelina's lap. He must have been having a pleasant dream.

*Everyone's sleeping so peacefully,* Feilong thought.

While watching his children doze, Feilong's lips tugged into a smile. This was the happy childhood that he'd never experienced. To his eyes, children sleeping so defenselessly was a strange sight.

*If only these days could last forever.*

As emperor, Feilong swore to make this a reality. After Angelina had become the Polaris Princess and returned the North Star to the mausoleum, the daoshi acknowledged Feilong's reign and became more cooperative. Likewise, the

nobles who'd snubbed his children for having foreign blood had begun to change their stances. Of course, the people of the Canopy loved Angelina. Once, everyone trembled in fear due to the emperor's reign of terror. Now, a new wind had begun to blow in the palace.

*Angelina has saved us all in so many ways,* Feilong realized.

He could never express the extent of his gratitude. What might have happened if he'd continued his reign of terror using only might and logic? According to some predictions, maintaining the empire's unity would have proved almost impossible. Yet suddenly, Angelina appeared and inspired a directional change.

Feilong envied the blissful space created by Angelina and everyone else. Even so, he turned back without waking them. If he called out to them, their newfound happiness would disappear. His inability to enter that space gave rise to a twinge of sadness. However, this was only natural. He was a man who'd slain countless people; he didn't deserve happiness.

"Fodder?" Angelina asked.

Startled, Feilong turned around.

Still in Kyril's arms, Angelina reached out to her father. She'd been gazing at his back sadly. "Pick me up, Fodder."

As Feilong bit his lip, something hot welled up in his chest, and he broke out into a smile. He hurried over to Angelina's side. Yet, in his haste, he stepped on Ryuho's tail.

"Ouch!" the Flame Tiger yelped. "What the hell are you doing?!"

Ryuho had become capable of speaking to people, even in his feline form.

Feilong ignored the yowling tiger and picked up his daughter. "Lina," he called out to her gently, fixing her disheveled hair. Buoyant and pink, it was similar to Phaenna's. Though it was hard to grab hold of, he managed to tuck an unruly lock behind her ear.







Angelina suddenly remembered what she'd seen on the Golden Dragon's back. Feilong's left ear was scarred as if he'd tried to rip out his Inverted Scale.

Other people were incapable of harming the Inverted Scale, as it would provoke the dragon's wrath. In other words, Feilong had attempted to rip it out himself.

*Did Father have a hard childhood as well? Angelina wondered. In that case, we're not too different. At least for now, I'd like him to rest.*

Angelina rubbed her eyes sleepily. "Wanna take a nap, Fodder?"

Unsure how to respond, Feilong glanced at the Golden Dragon. With his eyes still closed, the dragon loosened his coil, creating enough space for Feilong to enter.

Still holding Angelina, the emperor sat down next to Kyril. As Ryuho nuzzled his forehead against Angelina, his jaw naturally rested upon Feilong's arm. Angelina's warmth, Kyril's softness, and Ryuho's weight enveloped him. Thus, his heart opened, and he finally began to relax. While Ryuho's fluffy stomach moved up and down in a pleasant rhythm, a light crimson swallowtail butterfly came to rest upon his sword.

*I've heard that butterflies harbor the souls of the dead, Feilong thought. Are you joining us as well, Phaenna?*

He smiled, the presence of his departed wife filling him with joy. The Tianshi's Protective Seal Angelina had made for him was still fastened to his sword.

## Side Story: Ming Ming and That

**THE** proprietress of the Blue Ocean Bar had a three-year-old daughter named Ming Ming. The girl's black hair, parted down the middle, was braided into a loop. Many children in the lower city wore their hair in this style.

"Mommy, Mommy, this way," Ming Ming insisted. She yanked her mother by the hand, leading her to the bar's rear entrance.

"What's wrong, Ming Ming?" the proprietress asked. "I'm busy right now. Can this wait until later?"

"No. Come look now."

As her daughter pulled her hand, the proprietress sighed wearily. According to rumor, a coup d'état had occurred in the palace last night, and the infamously cruel Emperor Feilong had been killed. Fires had risen from the Purple Forbidden Palace, and its residents had all fled. Nevertheless, there hadn't been an official notice as of yet.

In Jinlong, the nobles and courtiers lived within the palace interior, protected by a magical barrier. The common folk lived in an outer enclosure between it and the palace walls. The people living in the outer enclosure weren't provided with details about the inner palace.

A change in the emperor's name didn't make much difference to most common folk. When the emperor before last committed suicide, the palace had fallen into pandemonium. The same had occurred when Feilong killed the previous emperor. Even so, life in the outer enclosure hadn't changed on either occasion.

That said, these changes could affect business both positively and negatively. For instance, what if the new emperor planned to prohibit alcohol? In that case, the Blue Ocean Bar would need to sell its entire supply before the official order came down. Seizing good business opportunities required forethought. The proprietress would need to speak with her husband about whether to resupply

their stock tonight.

Lately, managing a bar while raising a child had become quite difficult. Ming Ming had grown quite a bit, and the proprietress could no longer leave the bar while carrying the girl on her shoulders. This caused a whole host of problems. Ming Ming was brimming with curiosity and not the least bit shy.

With a long-suffering sigh, the proprietress reluctantly followed Ming Ming out of the rear entrance. The girl would keep pestering her until she did so, after all. When the proprietress noticed a pile of dirty clothes discarded by the wall next to the trash bin, she grimaced.

“Seriously?” she mumbled. “Is someone throwing away their garbage here without permission again...?”

Ming Ming yanked her mother’s hand once more. “No, not garbage.”

When the proprietress approached what appeared to be garbage, her eyes widened. A young woman was slumped against the bin. Her wavy, pink hair—both unusual traits in Jinlong—was tangled with bamboo leaves. She wore clothes made of crude burlap, which one rarely saw even in the lower city. Her bony limbs were reminiscent of dried leaves, and she appeared injured, her legs covered in blood.

Her face was hollow and devoid of emotion. However, despite being pale and emaciated, her features still possessed a refined beauty. Under her overgrown bangs, she had azure eyes, marking her as a foreigner.

“You awake, Missy?” Ming Ming called out to the foreigner.

In response, the foreigner gasped, cradling her head and shrinking back.

This reaction stunned the proprietress. The foreigner appeared to be scared of the three-year-old Ming Ming hitting her. *How did she come to that conclusion?* the proprietress wondered with a frown. As if in answer, the foreigner’s pitiful appearance provided a glimpse into her past.

Ming Ming crouched in front of the foreigner. “Not gonna hurt you, Missy,” she said in a troubled voice.

The foreigner timidly removed her hands from her head. However, her eyes

darted around like an animal looking for a chance to flee.

“Wait here a minute,” the proprietress instructed with a small sigh. She left, eventually returning with clean water and alcohol. First, she used the water to clean the blood from the foreigner’s legs. Next, she held up the alcohol. “This might sting, but I need to disinfect your wounds.”

As the alcohol touched her legs, the foreigner’s body stiffened, but her expression didn’t change. Though it must have stung quite a bit, she showed no signs of being in pain.

*How heartbreaking,* the proprietress thought.

“Pain, pain, go away, or Feilong will get you today!” Ming Ming cheered.

The foreigner’s eyes widened. Feilong’s name was synonymous with invincibility. Even children who didn’t know him as the emperor used his name in charms. This particular rhyme asked the invincible man to smite someone’s pain for them.

The proprietress could hardly believe the rumors of Feilong’s death. *Even if there was a coup, could he have died so easily?* she wondered.

“Pain gone?” Ming Ming asked.

The foreigner nodded impassively.

“Then you gotta shay shank you!” Ming Ming cried.

“Shank you,” the foreigner mumbled in response.

The meekness with which she followed a child’s instructions surprised the proprietress. At the same time, the foreigner’s purity warmed her heart. *She’s clearly a good person,* the proprietress thought. As someone who’d spent years serving customers, she knew this instinctively.

When Ming Ming tried to pat the foreigner’s head, her body stiffened again. She was preparing to be hit.

Seeming on the verge of tears, Ming Ming still patted her on the head. “Good girl, good girl. There ya go.”

Timidly, the foreigner lifted her head and looked at Ming Ming. After brushing

away the foreigner's overgrown bangs, Ming Ming caressed her cheek. The foreigner's eyes clearly reflected the girl's small form.

"Big smiles, okay?" Ming Ming prompted. "Gotta smile when shay shanks."



**SOON** afterward, Ming Ming and the foreigner began living together.

Apparently, Emperor Feilong and Prince Kyril were indeed killed during the coup. Citizens from vassal states had taken advantage of this uproar to escape the empire. At first, the proprietress and her husband suspected the bedraggled foreigner of being a slave to barbarians. Though the emperor before last had abolished slavery in Jinlong, it still existed in vassal states.

*This young woman was probably abandoned while her owners fled, the proprietress thought. How tragic.*

When the proprietress had asked for the foreigner's name, she'd replied, "That." Of course, no Jinlongian used this word as a name, but perhaps it had a different meaning in foreign countries.

Once clean and dressed up, That was a beautiful young woman. At first, she'd been unable to read or do arithmetic, but after being taught, she'd learned both skills in the blink of an eye. Likewise, she hadn't been able to look Ming Ming in the eye at first. Before long, however, she'd learned how to babysit *and* work in the bar. Every day, she poured her heart and soul into improving at her job. The proprietress's heart broke for That. She became like a mother to the young woman.

One afternoon, Ming Ming and That were out on a walk together. As the late summer sun scorched their skin, they arrived at a garden on the side of an unpaved path. There, they found a jujube tree, its branches sagging under the weight of abundant fruit. Picking all of them would be nearly impossible, and yet, even more, ripened jujubes had fallen to the ground in the tree's shade.

Ming Ming cocked her head. "Wanna eat, Missy?"

When the girl picked up a jujube and stuffed it in her mouth, That mimicked her. The lukewarm fruit produced a pleasant sound when chewed. Its bittersweet juice stung That's parched throat. While savoring this treat, she and

Ming Ming smiled at each other. However, since That was merely imitating Ming Ming, her expression turned out stiff and awkward.

The pair sat down on the side of the road and picked jujubes from the ground. Before long, a man appeared from inside a nearby house.

“Stop, thief!” he shouted.

That bowed her head and shrank into herself, expecting a scolding for pilfering food. Though she’d followed Ming Ming’s example and eaten the jujubes, she hadn’t meant to steal them.

Ming Ming looked at the man with a huge grin, her apron covered in jujube seeds. “So good! Shank you, Mishter!”

The man’s expression softened. “I see—I’m glad you liked them.” After saying this, he glared at That, whispering to prevent Ming Ming from overhearing. “I won’t tell you not to pick a piece of fruit or two, but don’t sit by the side of the road and eat a whole basketful.”

That nodded. “O-Okay...”

“A little mischief is fine, but don’t go too far. Children don’t know how much is permissible, so it’s the job of adults to teach them. You’re a big sister, so act like one, all right?”

That’s vision darkened. Having been imprisoned in the Big Dipper Garden her whole life, she didn’t know the common sense of the outside world. She couldn’t tell the difference between necessary rules and those you could break without being scolded.

*If only I’m punished, I can handle being scolded, yelled at, or even beaten, That thought. But what will I do if he beats Ming Ming, too?*

“S-Sorry,” That stammered tearfully, her face pale and her legs shaking. “I-I didn’t know. But even if you’re angry with me, p-please forgive this little girl.”

The man sighed softly. “No, it’s fine—I’m not angry with either of you,” he whispered into her ear. “But please apologize so that your little sister can hear.”

“Okay.” That took a deep breath and did as instructed. “I’m sorry for taking so many jujubes without your permission, sir.”

Upon hearing this, Ming Ming's eyes widened, and she quickly bowed her head. "Sorry for taking all the delicious, Mishter."

The man nodded coolly. "If you ever want to eat more than a few of my jujubes, come speak to me. I'll pick them for you. Jujubes ripen to the point of rotting. Eating them from the side of the road is dangerous, okay?" At this, the man smiled and patted Ming Ming's head. "Thank you for apologizing, little lass."

When the man accepted Ming Ming's apology, That's chest swelled with joy, and she couldn't suppress a smile. Neither had been punished, after all. Without thinking, she bowed her head and cried out in a loud voice, "Thank you so much!"

Ming Ming burst out laughing. "You did it, Big Shis! But you gotta smile when you shay shanks!"

The contrast between this slavish young woman and her sweet little sister took the man aback. All the same, he still found their exchange charming.

A little while later, the man gave them basketfuls of fresh and dried jujubes, and they returned to the bar. These gifts thrilled the proprietress. After making jujube wine, she asked That to deliver it to the man and thank him again. The man couldn't have been more pleased upon receiving the wine. Thus, he started visiting the bar regularly.

This exchange puzzled That. In her experience, mistakes were never forgiven. The idea of them leading to new friendships was unbelievable.



## **"WELCOME!"**

Whenever a customer entered the bar, two lively voices greeted them. These voices belonged to the cute salesgirl Ming Ming and the new employee That. Lately, they'd become a famous combo at the bar. The way in which Ming Ming took the lead was particularly amusing.

"Gotta smile when you say welcome, Big Shis!" Ming Ming exclaimed.

That nodded. "You got it!"



Whenever That followed the girl's instructions without any hint of displeasure, everyone in the bar chuckled.

"Hey, I'm ready to order!" a large man cried out.

That stiffened. However, Ming Ming pushed her on the rear to take the man's order. He was a regular customer who always doted on the girl.

"What can I get for you?" That asked nervously.

Ming Ming grinned and prodded her on the side. "Tell him what you recommend!"

"Oh, right. Today's special is thickly cut char siu."

"Smile, okay? When you ask for a fava, you gotta smile! Watch me." Ming Ming placed her hands on the table, looked up at the customer, and grinned. "Char siu's pretty tasty, y'know? Adorable pester BEAM!"

Ming Ming winked and punched the air. This bombardment of cuteness nearly stopped the customer's heart.

"Maybe I'm just being manipulated by your pester beam, but I can't refuse!" the man shouted, breaking out into a dopey grin. "Well then, I'll have an order of char siu!"

"Yay!"

That memorized the man's order while listening to his and Ming Ming's exchange.

"C'mon, you gotta smile too, Big Shis!" Ming Ming insisted. "Gotta smile to shoot the beam, okay?"

That meekly followed the girl's instructions. Incidentally, the word *beam* had originated from foreign street performers and had grown in popularity as of late.

That tried to look at the man with upturned eyes in imitation of Ming Ming. Unfortunately, her expression was stiff and awkward as she still struggled to force a smile.

"O-Our char siu is quite tasty," she stammered. "Please eat it? B-Beam...?"

The man burst out laughing. "I already asked for char siu, miss. Tell me what *you* recommend."

"T-The spring roll!" That squeaked, unable to think of anything else.

Gradually, she'd been learning how to show expression. No one got angry with her here, regardless of whether she panicked, made mistakes, or didn't know what to do. At most, people would laugh at her good-naturedly. This environment had begun to soften her heart.

"Well then, I'll have the spring roll, too," the man said.

That breathed a sigh of relief.

"Don't give customers or your big sister any grief, Ming Ming!" the proprietress called out.

Once again, Ming Ming looked at That and the customer with upturned eyes. "Am I giving grief?" she asked, cocking her head.

Ming Ming's cuteness caused That's heart to flutter. Both she and the customer shook their heads fervently.

"Not at all," the man said. "Right, miss?"

"Right," That agreed. "You're not giving us any grief. In fact, I want you to keep teaching me, all right?"

Ming Ming grinned triumphantly. "See, Mommy? Not giving grief!"

"Now you listen here!" the proprietress called out reproachfully.

Squealing, Ming Ming threw her arms around That. Naturally, That picked the girl up.

"Love you, Big Shis!" Ming Ming cheered, squeezing That around the neck.

*Where would I be without this precious little girl?* That wondered, hugging her back.

When a smile bloomed on her face like a cosmos, one of the customers gasped. "That's the first natural smile I've ever seen from her," he said.

Even so, the clamor in the bar drowned out his heartfelt murmur.

# Side Story: The Polaris Princess and Her Divine Guardian Beast

**TODAY**, a ceremony was being conducted at the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum. It would bind Ryuho to Polaris Princess Angelina as her Divine Guardian Beast.

Prime Minister Tomi had racked his brain for a way to openly place Ryuho by Angelina's side. Emperor Feilong found this most unamusing. He didn't think fondly of Ryuho being at Angelina's side in the first place. Furthermore, the Heavenly Sovereign Temple had been trying to approach Angelina ever since she became the Polaris Princess. Feilong loathed the idea of her becoming a political or religious tool.

On the other hand, Angelina and Kyril had lost their mother and her family. Since they lacked familial backing, Tomi wanted to provide them with as many other supporters as possible.



**THERE** was an official trial to become the Polaris Princess's Divine Guardian Beast. Ryuho had to deliver Angelina to the mausoleum without other guards accompanying them. In doing so, he would be publicly recognized as having the strength to protect her.

In order to reach the mausoleum, Angelina and Ryuho had come to the North Star Sanctuary's harbor. Small boats traveled across the palace's waterways, which they would use to reach the mausoleum.

Hearing this had taken Angelina aback, for she'd expected to ride Ryuho like usual. Incidentally, Feilong had been the one to decide on this route. It was a form of harassment against Ryuho, who hated water. Secretly, the emperor was hoping for the Flame Tiger to fail. If Ryuho became Angelina's guardian, he would be officially recognized as a deity in relationship to her. That didn't sit well with Feilong because of his childish desire to monopolize his daughter.

Angelina and Ryuho boarded a boat from the sanctuary's harbor. Today, Ryuho had chosen his feline form. He would make this pilgrimage to the mausoleum as a Flame Tiger.

Thus, Angelina boarded the boat first, and Ryuho followed. As soon as his first forepaw touched the deck, the boat wobbled, causing his tail and whiskers to puff out in surprise.

"Are you okay?" Angelina asked.

"Y-Y-Yeah, I'm f-f-fine!" Ryuho stammered.

He put on a brave face but wasn't the least bit fine. The deck wobbled beneath his paws and was entirely covered in water.

Feilong had come to see them off and appeared to be enjoying himself. "If you're scared, we can stop this, you know? You can give up on being Angelina's Divine Guardian Beast. Just being friends is good enough, don't you think?"

"I-I'm not the least bit s-s-scared!" Ryuho shouted, still putting on a brave front.

Angelina crossed her arms and pouted. "No bully, Fodder."

Kyril and Junshi rolled their eyes at Feilong. Was he really sparring with children?

"Can't they walk?" Kyril asked, taking pity on Ryuho. "There's no rule saying they must go by boat."

"If Ryuho can't protect Angelina on boats, he can't be her guardian," Feilong responded nonchalantly.

"I'm perfectly fine!" Ryuho shouted, his annoyance getting the better of him. "I was just a little bit... No, a tiny bit surprised!"

In contrast to his words, Ryuho's ears had gone flat, his fur puffing out. Overcome with concern for him, Angelina stood to get off the boat. As she did so, the vessel wobbled. Her heart jumped.

"Ah!" she squealed.

"Lina!" Ryuho cried out. At that moment, he leapt into the boat, grabbed her

collar with his mouth, and held her against him. As a result of his momentum, the boat rocked violently again. As Ryuho's heart pounded, he squeezed his eyes shut.

*I am scared, he thought, but I have to protect Lina!*

Ryuho recalled Angelina's cold, rain-soaked body from the day of the landslide. Human children died so easily. With this in mind, Ryuho planted all four paws on the deck to embolden himself. However, no matter how firmly he braced himself atop the water, the boat continued to wobble, threatening to tip over. Ryuho's thick legs quivered uncontrollably.

Angelina squeezed her arms around Ryuho's body. She stroked his soft fur with great care. Ryuho gradually settled down.

"Hurry up and get this thing moving!" he shouted at the boatman.

Ryuho wanted to escape from Feilong as soon as possible. Angelina looked at the boatman with a bemused smile. The boatman smiled back at her, charmed by the girl and her tiger.

"Well then, let's be on our way," he said.

The boatman's pole thumped against the river bottom, and the small vessel glided across the water. Ryuho clenched his teeth and glared at Feilong. He didn't want to face any more ridicule. After confirming that Feilong had left the harbor, he rested his chin on Angelina's shoulder and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ryuho," she said with a smile.

The Flame Tiger hated water, and his assertions of being fine were obviously bluffs. Even so, he'd leapt on the boat to protect Angelina. Now atop the rocking vessel, his body quivered ever so slightly, tufts of fur shedding from his coat. Regardless, he was still trying to protect her.

"This is my first time on a boat," Angelina said. "I'm glad it's with you."

Ryuho hugged her tightly. "Yeah! I'm glad my first time's with you, too!"

Each time the boat rocked slightly, Ryuho trembled again.

*Despite how much he hates water, he's trying so hard to become my guardian, Angelina thought. He must hate rain, too, but he still saved me on the day of the*

*landslide.*

Angelina's chest tightened painfully. Overcome with joy and bittersweet sorrow, she buried her nose in his fur. He was warm and smelled of the sun. Those two things defined Ryuho.

*I don't want to force him to become my guardian, Angelina thought. Just having him with me is enough. But given how hard he's trying, it would be rude to say that. I love everything about him, including how persistent he is.*

"Love you," Angelina murmured, her lips pressed against his fur. She didn't even know if he could hear her muffled voice.

However, Flame Tigers had sharp ears. He nuzzled his jaw against her face. "Love you too."

Ryuho's scent washed over Angelina, warming her heart.

People had gathered by the riverside to catch a glimpse of the Polaris Princess and her Divine Guardian Beast. Seeing the young girl and her tiger embracing so tightly, everyone smiled.

On the other hand, Feilong scowled at the pair. After disguising himself as a commoner, he'd gone ahead on the riverside path. He'd chosen the waterways to harass Ryuho, but if the tiger thrashed about atop the small vessel, he could put Angelina in danger.

Knights dressed in civilian clothes were stationed along the riverside path as well. Of course, Feilong had ordered this to be kept secret from Angelina and the temple.

Kyril was also watching over his sister surreptitiously. Ryuho's nose twitched. Upon catching the prince's scent, he looked in that direction and spotted a palanquin along the riverside path. Though commoners hardly ever used palanquins, this one wasn't particularly striking. It was simple enough that an elderly person with bad legs might have been using it. As Ryuho stared at the palanquin, its open bamboo blinds clattered shut. Kyril had panicked upon realizing that Ryuho had noticed him.

*That must have been Kyril, Ryuho thought, hanging his head. How overprotective can you get?*

“What’s wrong?” Angelina asked.

Ryuhō shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

Angelina wouldn’t think fondly of her brother’s overprotectiveness. Knowing this himself, Kyril had hid.

“Really?” Angelina pressed.

Ryuhō lapped his tongue against her cheek. “Promise.”

Feilong’s hand went to his sword. At that moment, Ryuhō spun around in alarm. He’d felt the emperor’s bloodlust against his skin.

“Did you see something?” Angelina asked.

“Just now...” Ryuhō trailed off.

His eyes darted back and forth, searching for any signs of Feilong nearby. Angelina followed suit, scanning the area. However, neither could find the emperor, considering how well he’d hidden himself.

*No way the emperor would abandon his duties to watch this, Ryuhō reconsidered. I’m overthinking things.*

“Could it have been my imagination?” he muttered to himself.

“Most likely,” the boatman responded with a laugh.

Following a short boat ride, they arrived at the mausoleum. A group of daoshi had lined up at the harbor and were waiting to receive them.

Once Angelina had disembarked, Ryuhō took a deep breath to psych himself up and jumped off the boat. The vessel nearly tipped over, causing the boatman to cry out reflexively. With his four paws on the ground again, Ryuhō breathed a sigh of relief and washed his face.

“Polaris Princess, Master Flame Tiger,” the sagely monk with the white beard greeted them reverently. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

The daoshi led Angelina and Ryuhō into the mausoleum. Once Angelina had changed into a sage woman’s outfit, she hung her other clothes and fabrics from Ryuhō’s neck. This new outfit was tailored from a type of red silk used for celebrations. Furthermore, the Big Dipper was embroidered into the fabric in

gold thread.

The daoshi performed the ceremony before the altar, chanting the predetermined ritual prayer. Thus, Angelina and Ryuho were bound together as princess and guardian. As soon as the ceremony ended, the ceiling's decorative North Star shone with light. The Heavenly Sovereign Temple had recognized Angelina and Ryuho's contract.

When the pair exited the mausoleum, they found a splendid palanquin decorated with flowers waiting for them. The daoshi urged them to sit inside it. When they did, the man-powered vehicle moved slowly, its decorations rustling. Ryuho had been officially recognized as Angelina's guardian. They would return to the sanctuary in this palanquin to introduce him to the public.

As cheers of joy rose from the crowd, Angelina and Ryuho looked at each other bashfully. To hide their embarrassment, they nuzzled their foreheads together.

"It's like a wedding ceremony!" a spirited child called out innocently.

At that moment, the air froze. Ryuho searched for the source of the sudden chill, and Angelina followed his gaze. Feilong stood there, disguised as a commoner with a hand on his sword. Kyril had joined the emperor as well. Smiling stiffly, he kept a subduing hand on his father's sword arm. Regardless, the emperor's bloodlust rendered Ryuho speechless.

*So that's my greatest enemy, huh?* Ryuho thought with a dry laugh.

"...Did Fodder and Big Brudder both ditch work to come here?" Angelina asked.

She buried her face in her hands, their overprotectiveness causing her cheeks to burn.







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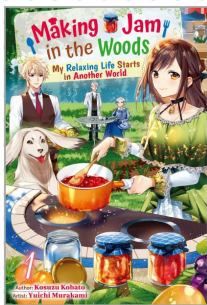
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